

The Natural Selection Act

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Category: How to Train Your Dragon, Rise of the Guardians

Genre: Adventure, Tragedy

Language: English

Characters: Dagur, Hiccup, Jack Frost

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-01-11 21:26:17

Updated: 2014-03-17 07:03:25

Packaged: 2016-04-26 16:26:08

Rating: T

Chapters: 11

Words: 32,513

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: AU. With the world at stake, a weakened Tsar Lunar needs an heir to save the world. But with no children of his own and fear that more than one might fight for the position, he decides how to pick his heir: by kidnapping Burgess's graduating class and forcing them to fight until only one student remains.

1. Prologue

****Hello, everyone! Okay, this is just a one-shot, but if I get 5+ reviews, I will turn this into a longer story with an opening similar to this one.****

****I got the idea from the movie 'Battle Royale', only this will have animated characters (namely Jack Frost, Princess Merida DunBroch, Princess Rapunzel, Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III, Dagur the Deranged, Mavis, Jonathan, Princess Anna, and her sister Queen Elsa). Also, it will have my own twists to it.****

****Anyway, I hope you guys like it. Again, if I get more than five reviews, I will turn it into a longer tale.****

****WARNING: Contains foul language, blood, and character death.****

* * *

><p>"Natural selection is anything but random."

_ - Richard Dawkins _

* * *

><p>As the twenty high-schoolers chattered, laughed, and joked, they never would've imagined that nearly half of them would be dead by midnight.<p>

The large school bus rode through the empty highway, leaving an ugly cloud of black exhaust in its wake. All the windows were open, granting entry to the cool air. Watery sunlight peeked out from the gray clouds, making the buildings' windows shine like polished diamonds.

The bus, painted bright yellow, was the sole source of color in this gray city. While most of the skyscrapers had remained intact, several of the smaller edifices had been reduced to piles of charred rubble.

This place had once been called Lunar City, the megalopolis that'd been started up and ruled by the Lunar family nearly six centuries ago. It had been a place of prosperity and glory, like the real-life version of the Emerald City.

Now, it was nothing but a ghost town.

But all this meant nothing to the students of Schola a Mensis. They were young, and to them 'centuries' fell into the same category as days. They knew they had their entire lives ahead of them, and that planning could wait.

Jack Frost, for example, hadn't even thought of what career he would end up pursuing. Knowing him, his three close friends figured that he would either be a magician or a comedian.

He had the jokes, and he certainly had the magic.

"Hey, Punzie!" Jack propped his elbows on the leather seat, eyeing the two girls sitting in front of him. "Y'know, your hair looks really nice today."

"Uh...thanks, Jack." Rapunzel replied as her hands flew to her long blonde braid. Her grass-colored eyes darted from left to right, unsure of where this conversation would lead. She glanced at her friend Anna, who merely shrugged in reply.

"Except, y'know, it's missing something." Jack pondered out loud as he rested his chin in his hand. Absent-mindedly, he waved his shepherd's staff. "Let me just add..."

Icicles formed in Rapunzel's hair in fern-like patterns. The blonde girl let out an ear-piercing shriek, making several heads turn.

Jack's pale face split into a wide grin. "...the 'icing' on the cake!"

"Jack, you jerk!" Anna wrapped an arm around her shaken friend as they both stood up. Reverting her attention to her friend, Anna spoke in a softer tone, "C'mon, Punzie. Let's sit somewhere else."

Jack slapped on a false hurt expression, placing a pasty hand over his heart. "Ouch. That's cold, Anna. I expected better from you."

Anna merely rolled her eyes as she led Rapunzel to a pair of vacant seats.

Jack snickered at his victory, but a tugging on his blue hoody brought him back on his pew.
>"What, you wanna get detention on school trips, too?" Hiccup asked, glaring at him from the rims of his glasses.<p>

Good ol' Hiccup Haddock Horrendous. Always looking for that silver lining.

Jack rolled his eyes as he crossed his legs. "Jeez, lighten up, Hic. You're so much like your dad sometimes it's freakin' scary."

Despite his annoyance, Hiccup smiled slightly. "You're probably the first person to every compare me to my dad." He sighed as he removed his glasses. "Well, except for saying that I was a talking fishbone, that I couldn't be his son, blah blah blah..." He took a deep breath and closed the heavy volume he'd been reading, making a plume of dust rise in the air.

"Still though, do you have to annoy Rapunzel every chance you get?" Hiccup asked as he ran a hand through his auburn hair. "I swear, every day it's something different. One day, you freeze the water she's drinking when she's not looking. Another day, you're making a wind blow so her skirt'll fly up. I mean, come on!"

"Hey, it's what I do." Jack replied with a shrug. "I got these powers, Hic. I don't know how, but I might as well use 'em before I lose 'em, right?"

"On the same girl every single day?" Hiccup raised his eyebrows.

Jack groaned. "Aw, come on. Don't start that again."

"You like her, don't you?" Hiccup asked, getting right to the point.

Jack scoffed. "What, her? Puh-leeze." Turning the tables, he leaned in closer so that he could witness his best friend's expression changed. "Anyway, what about you? I thought you had a thing for DunBrogh?"

Hiccup's ears turned neon red. "Shut up."

"I saw it, Hic. She's your freakin' screensaver!"

"Shut UP!" Hiccup snapped, the red creeping into his freckled face. "C'mon, please, it's not funny."

"You're right, it's not funny." Jack giggled evilly as he folded his arms behind his head. "It's hilarious."

Hiccup sighed, but his smile mirrored Jack's.

Yep, Frost and Horrendous. Polar opposites, yet still stuck together like glue. The pair had met back in middle school, when Hiccup's family had moved into Burgess after years of living as fishermen. The ninety-pound boy had stuck out like a sore thumb at the academy, being one of the few students to lack a supernatural ability. That, and his laughingly ridiculous performance in athletics had turned him into the school loser in a matter of days.

That is, until he was partnered with mischief-loving Jack Frost for a science project. The two had spent the following two weeks together at lunch, recess, and often after school. They both recieved A's, but they achieved something even more precious: a close friendship.

In the second row, a certain wild-haired girl sat, her chin on her fist and her sky-blue eyes on the outside road. As the school bus continued to glide across the cracked street, it passed a small crowd of spirits.

"Huh?" Merida raised her head, her eyebrows scrunching together. As she watched, another herd of angry-looking spirits stood in the street.

Now, these types of spirits weren't uncommon in Burgess, the now-magical capital of the USA. Normal humans and magical beings lived in relative peace, while these spirits served as guards.

So what were they doing here?

Merida leaned forward, her forehead pressing against the glass. _'Didn't the professor say that the city was deserted?'_ _

Before she could wonder any further, someone tapped her arm. Merida whirled around, waist-long locks flying everywhere. Her eyes met those of Audrey Swift, a transfer student from Thneedville. They were often paired up together as lab partners in chemistry class and, and they also happened to live on the same block. Audrey was nice, but she was a bit irritating at times.

"Hey, Merida!" Audrey's grin threatened to halve her face. "Remember the cookies we baked in cooking class? Well, I brought them here!" She held up a plastic bag stuffed with M&M biscuits.

"Uh...okay?" Merida asked with a shrug.

"So, let's share 'em! C'mon!" Without waiting for Merida's consent, Audrey grabbed the other redhead's hand and pulled her through the bus. Like an energetic Girl Scout, Audrey held out the bag of cookies, willing anyone to reach in and take one.

And take one they did. By the time the two girls reached the back rows, only a handful remained.

>Needless to say, Hiccup flushed upon seeing one of them.<p>

"Hey, guys!" Audrey greeted the two boys with a winning smile. "Want a cookie?"

"Hell yeah!" Jack simpered as he reached in and took not one, but three biscuits. He shoved them all in his mouth, chewing with a determination that would've put 'Jaws' to shame.

>He nudged Hiccup, who'd developed an unusual fascination with his book. "Hic, you try one! They're great!"<p>

"Uh..." The freckled boy brought the book closer to his face. "No, thanks. You eat them."

Audrey's eyes glinted as a knowing smile graced her lips. "Merida and I made them."

Merida opened her mouth to protest before admitting,
"Well...aye."

Hiccup glanced up. He sat there, pondering over his next move before nodding and taking a cookie for himself. "Sure, yeah. Thanks."

Audrey nodded. "No problem! Merida's been waiting forever to give those to you!"

Hiccup's face turned crimson while Jack threw his head back and howled. Merida whipped her head at Audrey. "Wot? That's not true!"

Before the dispute could go any farther, a boy in the seat adjacent to Jack and Hiccup's held up his camera. "Hey, guys!" He yelled, brown eyes shining, "Say cheese!"

The four other students quickly got into position. Merida smiled, hands on hips; Audrey made a peace sign with both hands; Jack stuck out his tongue; Hiccup smiled sheepishly.

A flash, and the image emerged.

"Let's see how it came out." Jonathan plucked out the photograph and blew on it. A few seconds passed, and the snapshot cleared. The young man grinned and held it out for the others to see. "Check it out, it came out great!"

"Yeah!" Jack held it in Hiccup's face. "Look Hic, you don't look as mopey as usual."

The weak insult slid off Hiccup like water on a window pane. What did he care how he looked? He was in the same image as Merida.

The bus approached a tunnel; as it entered, darkness enveloped the bus like a smothering cloth.

Silence fell.

The bus emerged a few minutes later, back in the pale gray sunlight.

But the students couldn't enjoy it. They were all knocked out.

* * *

><p>It was still dark when Jack opened his eyes. Icy-blue eyes pitched in every direction, trying to see past the inky veil. He could see vague outlines, but little else.<p>

As he sat up, the boy let out a moan. He felt like his head had been gorged with wool, like the time he'd tried to drink ten beers in one go.

Jack ran a hand through his pearl-colored hair, combing through a couple of knots. His hand rested on the back of his neck...and touched metal.

"Huh?" With both hands, Jack touched the metal object, and his fingers traced the outlines of a collar.

And even as he pulled, it didn't come off.

As Jack's breathing grew shallow, he glanced around again, hoping to find an answer to the craziness he'd woken up to.

All around him, his fellow classmates woke up. In the corner, Dagur the Deranged let out a curse as he rubbed his head. Several feet away, Anna shook her sister Elsa, awakening her. Jonathan raised his shaggy head, placing a hand on his girlfriend Mavis's shoulder.

What about...?

Jack took a gader, searching the dakr room for a familiar face, when he spotted a stick-like figure lying a couple of meters away. Flying over, Jack knelt beside his friend and shook him awake. "Hey, Hic. Wake up, hey!"

"Hmmm...?" Hiccup's eyes opened as he moved his head. Even in the terrible lighting, Jack saw something that made his blood run cold.

Hiccup was wearing a metal collar as well.

Everyone else probably had one, too.

Suddenly, a door creaked open. Everybody jumped to their feet as another small herd of people entered the room. With a loud clack, light flooded the room. Several kids groaned or grimaced as the sudden brightness stung their eyes.

Once they got used to it, an even worse sight was waiting for them.

All the students stood face-to-face with an old man in a wheelchair, flanked on either side by spirits.

'Just like before.' Merida thought as she took a step back.

With a soft smile, he spoke in an oddly loud - yet calm - voice. "Hello, students of Schola a Mensis. I'm glad to see that you all arrived to Lunar City safely." He held a withered hand to his chest. "I am Tsar Lunar, or the Man in the Moon."

A ripple of excitement and shock pulsed through the crowd. Several murmured in disbelief, while others seemed ready to faint. Jack, for one, stared at the old man like he'd just claimed to be Batman.

This was Tsar Lunar? The first Guardian, creator of all the present Guardians? Protector of worlds? This guy looked like he couldn't fight off a cold, never mind the forces of darkness.

The so-called Tsar tilted his head in a small bow. "Pleased to meet all of you."

Without further ado, he turned to the whiteboard behind him, selected a blue marker and began to write something.

Ted Wiggins jumped to his feet. "What's going on here?"

Dagur rose. "Where the fuck are we?!"

Elsa stood and gestured to the spirits. "Who are these guys?"

Rather than responding to the students' questions, the so-called Man in the Moon turned to the unwilling audience and gestured at what he'd written. "Does this look familiar to anyone?"

Everyone eyed the writing on the wall and felt the temperature drop a dozen degrees. And this time, it wasn't because of Elsa or Jack.

It was due to the words written in blue ink:

'The Natural Selection Act'.

Of course, most (if not all) of the students had studied Darwin's theory of evolution. But that theory was hardly used in today's society: in this civilization, everyone got a chance to live, no matter how weak they seemed. Hiccup was a living example of this. In the village he'd grown up, all of the runts had been sent off to sea. But when he'd been born, his parents had been unable to part with the small baby. Thus, the barbaric custom was abandoned.

Everyone's confusion was all too obvious, for Tsar Lunar shook his head as he dropped the marker and pressed a button on his wheelchair. As he moved towards the kids, he chided, "No, that's not good. Not good at all. How could they censor something like this on the news?"

He shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter, either way. I know all of you anyway." He turned to certain platinum blonde. "Elsa Arendelle, a descendant of the Snow Queen and the first one in twelve generations to inherit her powers. I heard you refused to go to school until your sister begged you to come along."

Elsa gasped and bowed her head. Her pale face flushed, and her hands tightened into fists.

Next, Tsar turned to Jonathan, who recoiled under those hazy pale eyes. "And who could forget the famous Jonathan Harker? Even when you came from one of the richest families in the country, you gave it all up to travel the world as a penny-gathering vagabond. And now, you've landed on an interesting young lady with a peculiar diet." Tsar snickered at Mavis, "It starts out innocently enough, doesn't it, Miss Dracula? Today you want to kiss him, tomorrow you'll want to bite a hole in his sternum."

Mavis lunged at the man, but Jonathan wrapped his arms around her waist. She fought and struggled, but in the end she calmed down. Tsar Lunar shook his head as he raised his voice. "Listen up! Because of people like Mr. Harker over here," He waved a finger at the couple, "The world's defence has crumbled down. As a result, Pitch Black, the Boogeyman, has returned. And he's brought help: Alvin the Treacherous, Gothel the witch, and Mor'du."

An uneasy chatter rose amongst the students. Disbelief and despair hung in the air like mist.

>Jack nearly fainted. How could Pitch be back? The Boogeyman had been dragged back into his own hovel, last time Jack had seen him.
Next to him, Hiccup was hardly better off. Alvin...was still alive?
>In the crowd, Rapunzel whimpered and wrung her hands at the mention of her former parent.
Merida gasped. Mor'du...the bear?! The monster that had nearly killed her? How could it be back? Hadn't it fallen found its peace?
>Apparently not.<p>

Tsar raised his hands for silence, which he recieved a moment later. "None of this was on the news, I know. That's because nobody wants a panic on their hands. But Russia's gone. Nobody's heard from Italy, Germany, Spain, and half of Asia in weeks. Those places have been utterly consumed by darkness. And why? Because nobody, not even my Guardians, were strong enough to stop them." He chuckled drily as he ran a withered hand over his bony chest. "I, also, am reaching my limit. I've used so much of my power to protect this country alone, and if I keep it up for much longer, I'll die. That is why I, alongside Mother Nature and the other governors of the spiritual world, passed this law."

He pointed at the whiteboard. "The NS Act!"

As if on cue, the flourescent lights flickered uneasily above everyone's heads. Tsar Lunar lowered his wrinkled hand. "So, for today's lesson...you have to kill each other off until only one remains. The winner will become the next Man in the Moon, and from there, the bigwigs will select another 'Big Four'."

Somehow, he managed to hold the stare of every single student present. "Pitch Black must be stopped, and at this point taking risks is necessary."

An impenetrable chill shrouded over the students, freezing them to the bone. They all shared glances, as if memorizing each other's faces right before Death came with its swinging scythe.

"Sir..." All heads turned to see Anna raising her hand. "What're you saying?" She asked in a quivering voice. "Our parents would never let us-"

"They've just been informed." Tsar Lunar explained calmly. "Just an hour ago, actually." He turned his wheelchair around and spoke, "Now, an informant, Mr. Foxglove will inform you of the rules." He snapped his fingers, and a sprite stepped forward.

Several kids' eyes widened. This sprite couldn't be much older than they were, maybe seventeen or eighteen. But his face and eyes were aged ten extra years, like he'd seen and done too much already.

"Hello, twelfth grade class of Schola a Mensis. You are the lucky group selected for the all-new program to fight against Pitch Black and his minions. Now, listen carefully and fight well." Foxglove pressed a button on his watch, and a holographic image of the city hovered in the air. Despite their fear, several kids gaped in awe.

"Currently, we're in the middle of what used to be Lunar City, right before Pitch attacked. Again, you won't find that in the news..."

Foxglove suddenly stopped talking and threw something at the crowd.
"Hey, you! No whispering!"

A flash of silver.

Then, Kristoff Bjorgman leaned back. Then, he collapsed on the ground like a dropped puppet.
>A dagger lay buried in the middle of his forehead.<p>

A chorus of shrieks echoed through the room as everyone backed away from the corpse like being near it would result in death as well. Anna cried out and tried to run towards Kristoff, but Elsa held her back.

Calmly, as though strolling in a park, Foxglove walked towards the fallen student and hovered over him. "Sorry, it's wrong to kill, isn't it?" He snorted. "You didn't have any powers anyway." Then, he bent down and extracted the bloody dagger from its target.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Elsa yelled and threw her hands up, ready to freeze the life out of these bastards. But nothing happened, making her blue eyes expand.

"Don't bother." Foxglove said coolly, "This room's been specially designed to deactivate all powers."

That meant...the students looked at each other...they were
powerless?

Another chorus of screams bounced off the walls. All the students rushed for the exits, pushing and shoving to get there first. But once they touched the door handles, the kids flew back as if shoved. The spirits rushed in, beating and hitting students that tried again. Those that feared pain crouched down, their heads in their hands.

Tsar Lunar stared at the crazy scene before him with just a hint of regret. Then, he nodded and turned to Foxglove. "You can continue."

"Right." Foxglove stepped forward and pointed at his neck. Acting as though nothing had happened, he stated, "Another important thing to remember is, you can't just barricade yourselves forever. If a new person doesn't die every 12 hours..." He snickered, "That's where your collars come in."

Everyone reached up and touched their necklaces, feeling their pulses beating faster against their fingertips.

"They're totally bullet-proof, shock-proof, and water-proof. They're also permanent, so if you win, this'll be a souvenir, I guess." He grinned. "But they're not just for decoration. Like I said before, if someone doesn't die every twelve hours, we'll find out because the collars monitor your vital stats. All we'll have to do is push a button and...BOOM!"

All the kids jumped back, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"That's right: all the collars will automatically explode, and no one will win! So you might as well fight to keep that from happening." He pointed at the hologram. "If you want food, water, or weapons, there are certain areas you can find them in. You'll have to figure it out for yourselves later."

He eyed the herd of terrified faces. "Now, any questions so far?"

Hesitantly, a hand rose.

"Yes?"

Audrey, her bubbly attitude gone, asked, "The survivor gets to go home, right?"

Everyone stared at Foxglove, eyes wide in anticipation.

Foxglove nodded. "Yeah. But only if everybody else is dead."

Sheepishly, Audrey lowered her hand.

Eugene Fitzgerald raised his hand. "How were we picked for this shit?"

Ignoring the swear word, Foxglove answered. "You're the first graduating class of Schola a Mensis. You're the first group of youngsters with power. You represent the next stage for the magical world. That's how."

Bitterly satisfied, Eugene nodded and lowered his hand.

Merida raised her hand. "What did we do to deserve this?" She asked, her voice shaking in anger.

Foxglove snorted. "Come on, don't act like this is a punishment. Out of all of you, we're weeding out the weaklings and picking the strongest one here. That strong one will take Tsar Lunar's place and save the world from darkness." He glared at them. "You think your lives matter more than the people who've already died?"

He shook his head. "No. These are desperate times, so desperate measures are called for. So let the games begin, and we'll see who in here is the apex predator."

2. Chapter 1: The Game Begins

****Hello citizens of Planet Earth! If there's one thing you're going to learn about me, it's that I'm a woman of my word: I said that I would turn my one-shot, 'The Natural Selection Act', into a full-length story if I got 5+ reviews. And that's what I got. Sooo without further ado, let's follow the unluckiest teens alive and see what happens during this journey.****

****PS: This takes place immediately where the one-shot left off. If you have not read it first, you ought to in order to obtain a better understanding of what's going on.****

* * *

><p>Recap_

With a soft smile, the old man held a withered hand to his chest. "Hello, students of Schola a Mensis. I'm glad to see that you all arrived to Lunar safely. I am Tsar Lunar, or the Man in the Moon..."

"Listen up! Because of people like Mr. Harker over here," He waved a finger at the couple, "The world's defence has crumbled down. As a result, Pitch Black, the Boogeyman, has returned. And he's brought help: Alvin the Treacherous, Gothel the witch, and Mor'du..."

"...That is why I, alongside Mother Nature and the governors of the spiritual world, passed this law."

He pointed at the whiteboard. "The NS Act!"

"So, for today's lesson, you have to kill each other off."

* * *

><p>Chapter 1: The Game Begins

The room was so silent you could hear a pin drop. It was almost as soundless as the corpse lying in the middle of the room, his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling. Up until a few hours ago, he'd been Kristoff Bjorgman, the loner who'd only ever shown his soft spot to Anna.

But now, he was nothing but an unmoving sack of bone, muscle, and fat.

Elsa stroked her sister's hair, but nothing could console Anna. The girl covered her face with her hands as her slim shoulders trembled incessantly. Even though nobody else moved to comfort the distraught girl, they all thought it: _'Anna, we're so sorry for your loss. We know how much he meant to you.'_

The brief mourning ended with the loud screeching of metal against wood. Everyone spun around to see the iron doors being pushed aside. Soldier after soldier came out of the shadows like demons. As they did, they pushed several shopping carts filled to the brim with identical green gym bags. The students were wise enough to get out of the soldiers' way, and those who weren't were quickly pulled back by their friends.

Soon, five trolleys were positioned in front of the room. The soldiers stepped aside but had their guns drawn, if a foolish student tried to pull a stunt.

None of the students dared open their mouths, but their facial expressions mirrored each other's: _'What the hell are these for?'_

"In each of these bags is everything you'll need for this little game." Tsar Lunar held his wrinkled hand over one of the trolleys. "You'll be receiving a flashlight, water, a map of the city, and a

small book full of riddles. The book is the most important part because behind each riddle is the location of something you'll need, be it food or a first-aid kit. The only down side is that if it takes you too long to solve a riddle, somebody else might have already taken the goods."

He lowered his hand. "Now, when Foxglove," He nodded at the spirit, "calls your name, you will be given one of these bags. Then, you will be required to leave this room and begin the game."

With that, he nodded once again at Foxglove, who cleared his throat and held up his clipboard. "Snotlout Jorgenson!"

"H-here!" All eyes turned to Hiccup's cousin, who'd been pressed against the wall since they'd all woken up. He was the incarnation of everyone's idea of a Viking: tall, well-built, and a sneer that would send all two-year-olds running for their mothers. But now, he looked precisely the way Hiccup felt: disoriented and beyond terrified.

For the first time in their short lives, Hiccup and Snotlout had something in common: the fear to die.

Well, Fate certainly had a sense of irony.

Snotlout turned to look at the people who'd been his friends until tonight. He flinched, as if expecting them to begin 'playing' already, before running towards Foxglove. The spirit nodded and checked off Snotlout's name as another spirit grabbed a random bag and tossed it Snotlout's way. The young Viking caught it with the skill of a football player and scrambled to the doorway. But instead of running out, he stopped and turned back to his classmates. He stood there, contemplating what to say, when a spirit screamed at him, "GET MOVING!"

Snotlout, letting out a rather unmanly yelp, ran out of the room and into the great unknown.

"Next," Foxglove called out, "Ruffnut Thornton."

"Here." Ruffnut stepped forward, her pointy face already blanching. Tearing out of her brother's loving arms, she made her way towards the front of the room. Before she could, Tuffnut lunged and grabbed his sister's arm. "You're still my sister." He stated in a choked-up voice.

Ruffnut seemed ready to cry right there and then. She gave him a piteous nod. "I know." With that, she pried Tuffnut's hand off her arm and ran towards the doorway, catching the thrown bag along the way. Tuffnut simply stood there, staring after his sister.

And all Foxglove did was check off the girl's name.

Just as Ruffnut's rapid footsteps began to fade, Foxglove read, "Eugene Fitzgerald."

Rapunzel crimsoned as she dared herself to look at him. Several others eyed him as well, but none of their stares contained half the adoration Rapunzel's eyes had. After all, he was nothing but a thief who'd been going in and out of juvenile halls since his preteen years. He'd even stolen from his classmates from time to time,

ranging from lunch money to schoolbooks to clothing.

Who knows? Maybe he'd play the game. Maybe he'd bring himself to steal the most precious thing his classmates had to offer: their lives.

Eugene pressed his lips together as his hands fisted at his sides. He exhaled through his nostrils before running towards the exit. He caught the back even more efficiently than Snotlout had. Just like the dark-haired Viking, Eugene stopped at the doorway and turned to his sixteen classmates and offered them a good-natured smirk. He raised his bag over his head, shook it once, and ran out a second later.

"Next!" Foxglove eyed his list. "Heather Duchannes."

Hiccup was one of the first students to turn their heads. At the sound of her name, Heather wrung her hands, as if squeezing wet laundry, and took a step back. Astrid Hofferson glared at her, but most of the gazes were sympathetic.

Heather was one of the newer students. In fact, she'd only joined this class four months ago. Her arrival had been far from serene, and that was putting it mildly. Long story short, she'd committed an error. While most of her classmates had forgotten about it, Astrid had never forgiven the raven-haired girl.

Heather gulped before dusting off the front of her patched vest and made her way to the front of the classroom. She gave her classmates a wave, as though she were going home instead of an unknown battlefield.

She caught the bag and was gone.

Foxglove checked Heather's name off.

Hiccup felt the lump in his throat grow to the size of his fist, but he (barely) managed to swallow it down. Jack's cool hand patted his back, and that gave Hiccup the courage to continue watching.

"Next," Foxglove read, "Fishlegs Ingerman."

'No!' Hiccup almost cried out, but Jack tightened his hold on Hiccup's bony shoulder. Hiccup closed his mouth, but his forest-green eyes began to water. Fishlegs was his next-door neighbor and only friend besides Jack. He was also the only kid Hiccup could mention molecular physics to (and not look like a nerd).

But all the complex scientific principles in the world couldn't help them now.

Fishlegs looked ready to pass out. Instead, he gulped and stumbled towards Foxglove, hopping over a deliberately extended shin as he did so.

"Doesn't miss many meals, does he?" Foxglove murmured to a nearby soldier, making Fishlegs' face go maroon. He collected his bag and was out of the room before anyone could laugh at him. Again, anyways.

Another name off the list. Another name proclaimed: "Elsa Arendelle."

Anna's freckled face blanched as she spun around. Her sister's blue eyes watered like a frozen pond at the beginning of spring. Somehow maintaining her regal posture, Elsa placed a hand on her sister's shoulder. "I...have to go, Anna."

"Elsa..." Anna buried her face in her sister's pale blue blouse. Elsa flinched before wrapping her slim arms around her weeping sister, her cheek resting on Anna's strawberry-blonde hair. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying hard not to lose control.

"Hey, move it, dollface!" Foxglove snapped. "We've got a schedule to keep!"

Elsa looked up without letting go of her crying sister. Her face was colder and more deadly than any snowstorm her or Jack could conjure up. Reluctantly letting go, Elsa kissed Anna's forehead before standing up and walking towards the front of the room. She kept her head raised high and her hands folded in the small of her back.

In that moment, her classmates could believe that Elsa was a descendant of a queen. She looked as sovereign as any royal they'd studied. Without batting an eyelash, Elsa received her bag and slung it over her shoulders.

With a rustle of her indigo skirts, the eldest Arendelle was gone.

"Next." Foxglove adjusted his glasses. "Mavis Dracula."

Jonathan stiffened before looking down at the girl in his arms. Mavis's pretty, pale face crumpled like a newspaper as she covered Jonathan's hand with hers. She tore herself from her boyfriend's arms but held his hand. The two shared a look that said more than words ever could. Then, Mavis squeezed Jonathan's hand before letting it go and running to the front of the class. The boy's hand dropped lifelessly at his side, his eyes never leaving his girlfriend.

A soldier tossed her the bag before quickly retracting his hands, like Mavis had an ailment he didn't want to catch.

Instead of running off like all the others, though, Mavis stood there for a moment. Then, she turned to Tsar Lunar, the man she'd been taught to worship and adore, and threw the bag at him. Tsar caught it, eyeing Mavis with nothing short of amusement.

Mavis stood there, glaring at him with nothing short of contempt, before running out of the room.

Defenceless.

"Okay, next up." Foxglove read. "Ted Wiggins."

The youngest kid in the class straightened, his hazel eyes widening. Hiccup knew how he felt: besides him, Ted was the weakest boy in the class, as well as the shortest. He wasn't even the smartest kid - that position belonged to Hiccup and Fishlegs. The only thing that saved the boy was his power: technopathy.

Shooting one last glance at Audrey, the boy placed his goggles over his eyes and was running a second later. He caught the bag flung his way and was gone, leaving nothing and everything behind.

"Next up is...er..." Foxglove frowned as he read the name. "It says here: 'Dagur the Deranged'."

Nobody gasped, but the air drained out of the room. Hiccup's breath hitched in his throat as the crowd parted to reveal his other next-door neighbor.

The one he did everything possible to avoid running into.

Slowly, as if in a trance, Dagur rose from the desk he'd been sitting on and strolled towards the front of the room. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked calmly, as though being kidnapped and forced to participate in a battle of the death was nothing new for him.

Hiccup wouldn't have had trouble digesting that. Everything about Dagur screamed 'psycho', from the three blue streaks running across his face to the inordinate number of weapons hidden in his belt.

And his grin. Oh, who could forget that? Every time Dagur looked at...well, anyone in the class, his expression mirrored that of a hungry dog staring into a butcher's window.

As he walked, the kids made way for him like frightened mice distancing themselves from a prowling cat.

Dagur grimaced. _'Pathetic.'_ Then, he held his hand out and caught his bag without looking away from the exit. Still with a hand in his pocket, he left the room.

Jack's chest rose and fell with every breath he tried to control. He'd had his doubts regarding the others, but all bets were off with Dagur. Jack was willing to bet his eyesight that Dagur would participate in this game without hesitation.

"Next up, Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III."

Hiccup's eyes widened to anime proportions. He sat there on the floor, still wearing the helmet his father had given him that morning ('for luck', he'd said), like a lamb being dragged to the alter.

And just like the lamb, he didn't have a choice in staying or going.

None of them did.

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup rose to his feet. As he did, he felt something tug at his sleeve.

>Hiccup looked down. His forest-green eyes locked with Jack's icy-blue ones. Jack mouthed, 'Wait for me.'

Hiccup's jaw set. He gave his friend a single nod before making his way to the front of the room. Foxglove smirked at the sight of the ninety-pound boy, checking his name off as he did.

Hiccup saw a flash of red as he walked. Red curls, like clouds at sunset.

His heart fluttered.

Ever so slightly, Hiccup turned his head and looked at Merida. He'd done it a thousand times before, but now, she was returning the stare.

Hiccup mouthed, 'Meet me outside'.

Merida frowned slightly, but Hiccup didn't have time to ponder over it. He turned to the soldiers, who tossed him a bag.

With one last glance at the kids he'd seen for years, kids he'd grown up with, Hiccup walked down the corridor. It reeked of gasoline, unwashed bodies, and despair.

'We can't do this. No, we won't do this.' He thought to himself as he walked. _'Tsar doesn't know us at all. None of them do. We've all known each other for years. There's no way in hell we'd kill each other off.'_ The words had a soothing effect on him like balm on a searing burn. With each step, Hiccup grew more confident. He walked a little more quickly, straightening in posture and widening the space between his steps.

'Yeah...yeah!' Hiccup grinned crookedly. _'Maybe Dagur'll play, but Heather won't! Elsa won't, and neither will Eugene. We have to group together, get somewhere safe, and find a way outta here.'_

With that, Hiccup stepped outside.

His grin was replaced with a look of horror.

Ruffnut Thorston was sprawled on the ground several feet away, in a puddle of her own blood. Her light blue eyes reflected the full moon's light, glowing as dimly as embers. Her mouth was open, as if trying to say something that would never be heard.

A bullet hole was on her forehead, like the Devil's fingerprint.

3. Chapter 2: Bloody Beginnings

Recap

'We can't do this. No, we ****won't**** do this.' Hiccup thought to himself as he walked. 'Tsar doesn't know us at all. None of them do. We've all known each other for years. There's no way in hell we'd kill each other off.'

With that, Hiccup stepped outside.

Ruffnut Thorston was sprawled on the ground several feet away, in a puddle of her own blood.

A bullet hole was on her forehead, like the Devil's fingerprint.

* * *

><p>Chapter 2: Bloody Beginnings

"Oh...Thor..." Hiccup's bag dropped to the concrete with a muted _thunk_. He stood there staring at Ruffnut's bloody corpse as his stunned mind tried to realize what it meant.

Someone had decided to play. Somebody from his class, someone with whom Hiccup had most likely exchanged words with at some point, had actually decided to play this horrendous game of death.

The Viking felt his breakfast, as sour and fruity as lemonade, force its way up his scrawny throat. He spun around and collapsed on his knees as vomit poured out of his mouth. His thin body shuddered as he regurgitated, his vomit mixing with the tears running down his freckled cheeks. His twig-like fingers dug into the ashy gravel, and his auburn hair hung in his face.

He cried as he retched, but when his empty stomach clenched and nothing came out, the tears didn't stop. Sitting back on his heels, Hiccup tilted his head back and covered his face with his hands.

He wasn't merely weeping for Ruffnut, who, despite her addiction to adrenaline, hadn't done anything to deserve such a fate. He was crying for Tuffnut, the person who loved Ruffnut the most and whose feelings were mutual; the boy would step out here and be greeted by the sight of his dead sister.

>No. Hiccup was also crying for everyone involved in this horrendous game.<p>

A gunshot sliced through the air like a knife through silk. Hiccup jumped three feet in the air as a small bullet hole appeared an inch from where he was sitting. With wide, watery eyes, the Viking scrambled to his feet and ran aimlessly.

Another gunshot, followed by a fiery pain in his thigh.

Hiccup screeched like a bird as he crashed on the sidewalk, face down. His thigh was a pillar of anguish, and he could feel the thin material of his pants sticking to his skin. He could feel warm liquid seeping on the gravel.

Blood. _His_ blood.

'Oh, Odin, please, no!' Hiccup thought desperately as he spun around so that he was lying on his back. He saw it, and that somehow intensified the pain. There, just a centimeter above his knobbly knee, was a dark spot that was widening like a ripple with each passing second.

Silently begging to every god he and his fellow Berkians worshipped, Hiccup tore his sleeve off and wrapped it around the wound. It was a pathetic attempt at medicine, but at least it would smother the bleeding.

He'd barely finished the knot when another gunshot echoed in his ears. The bullet grazed his exposed, freckled arm. Hiccup cried out and slapped a hand over his cut.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" He screamed hoarsely.

The shadows rippled like the ocean directly before a storm. Then, they parted to reveal a large figure pointing a polished revolver at Hiccup.

"Name four days of the week that start with the letter 't'." A male voice recited mechanically. "That was easy. So easy, I heard more challenging riddles when I was a baby." As the figure drew closer, the moonlight chased away the darkness from his face. When Hiccup saw his attacker's face, fresh tears formed in his eyes.

"The answer is: Tuesday, Thursday, today, and tomorrow. This gun was hidden in a little store right by here. One that sold calendars." Fishlegs aimed the revolver at his former friend's face. "What do you think, Hiccup?"

"W...w..." Hiccup swallowed as his forest-green eyes darted at Ruffnut's still form. "_Why?!_ Why did you kill her, Fishlegs?! She never did anything to you!" His voice cracked as he dragged himself across the sidewalk. He shook his head. "Don't you get it?! If you do this, you'll be playing right in their hands!"

"I..." Fishlegs' lip quivered, and for the first time Hiccup really saw the blonde boy's face. His eyebrows were scrunched together, and his eyes were as swollen as red as Hiccup's felt. There were drying tear stains on his round cheeks. "I'm the first one everyone's gonna try to kill!"

Hiccup stared at Fishlegs. "WHAT?!"

"Yeah! You, too!" Fishlegs brought the gun a little closer to the guy who, up until five hours ago, had been his only friend. "You'll try to kill me first! I'm the weakest, even if I'm big!"

Coach Brooks sighed as he leaned against the wall, arms as thick as logs folded across his chest. "Are you planning on completing the exercise, Ingerman?"

_Just a few feet away, Fishlegs heaved and groaned, his large hands cupping his knees. Sweat was streaming down his face like motor oil. He shook his head, making his sweaty blonde locks shake.

"I'm...sorry...Coach. I...can't...do it."_

Coach sighed again before tilting his head at the benches. "Fine, then. Sit down."

"Thank...you." Fishlegs all but dragged himself to the wooden seat, where he wiped his brow with his small towel. As they passed, some of his classmates snickered.

""I can't run more than three laps in gym! I can't even win an arm-wrestling match with Astrid!"

Astrid flexed her fingers, her pretty face morphed into a look of victory. "Better luck next time, Fishlegs."

>"Uh...yeah, sure Astrid." Fishlegs nodded as he rubbed his arm. All he could think was how he would never challenge Astrid again, at least not in front of their classmates. The thin girl had brought his hand slamming on the desk as though it'd been weightless.

From his desk, Eugene smirked as he played on his GameBoy. "Dude, seriously. You were beaten by a girl." He shook his head. "Ya gotta lift weights more often."

Fishlegs shook his head so quickly his features blurred. "No. No!"

Hiccup's face softened, if only a bit. "Fishlegs..."

"You'll all try to kill me first!" Fishlegs shouted. "I'm an easy target! But before you can try...I'll kill you all!"

"Will you calm down already?!" Hiccup snapped. Fishlegs wavered, but only for a second. Hiccup didn't dare miss his opportunity. "Listen to me! I-I got an idea! We've got to round up the others and try to get outta here! We can all escape together, Fishlegs!"

"E..." Fishlegs frowned. "Escape?" He echoed. "Really?"

"Yes, really!" Hiccup nodded. His jaw set. "You did a really shitty thing just now. You killed one of your friends because you let fear get inside your head." He shook his head. "We're not your enemies, Fishlegs! At least...I'm not."

"Hic...cup." Fishlegs lowered his gun.

His eyes locked with Hiccup's as silence stretched between them like a smothering cloth, blocking out all and any sound. Like a passing train, Fishlegs thought over every good memory he'd had since joining this school.

Hiccup was in nearly all of them.

He and Hiccup had done countless reports and projects together. They'd had study dates. On the last day of school last year, they'd gone to an ice cream shop and ordered the biggest sundaes available. The two of them had had splitting stomach-aches afterwards, but they'd laughed all the way home.

If he couldn't trust Hiccup, he couldn't trust anyone.

Fishlegs straightened and held his pistol over his head, ready to toss it away...when something red caught his eye.

Slowly, he turned his head.

Ruffnut was still lying on the ground. Her blank eyes, as hollow as dead trees, stared at him accusingly. Her lips moved, and he could hear her whisper in his ear. _'You useless waste of skin! You loaded that gun while my back was turned, and shot me in the head like a coward. You think holding a gun makes you so macho? Guess again. You're nothing but a gutless fatso. If you lost that gun, you'd be dead ten seconds before ya knew it.'_

"I..." Fresh tears streamed down Fishlegs's cheeks. He shook his head and turned to Hiccup with fire in his eyes. The gun was aimed at Hiccup's freckled forehead before he could even blink.

"I ****can't!****" Fishlegs shouted. "Even if we banded together, I've already killed Ruffnut! Nobody would trust me! They'd slit my throat

in my sleep!"

Hiccup shook his head as he scooted away. "No, Fishlegs..." But he wasn't trying to convince Fishlegs that things weren't as he believed. Nothing in the world would've torn the veil of fear from the blonde boy's eyes.

"I'll kill all of you!" Fishlegs shouted. "ALL of you!"

A shadow appeared behind him, a black silhouette against the full silver moon.

Hiccup gasped.

"Yaah!" The figure cried - in a male voice - as it swung a fist across Fishlegs's head. The boy cried out as he collapsed on the concrete. The pistol flew out of his fleshy hand and skidded out of his reach.

"C'mon!" The figure grabbed Hiccup's arm and yanked him to his feet. The moment he was standing, pain exploded in Hiccup's thigh. But this mysterious stranger apparently held no sympathy for weaklings: he merely pulled Hiccup's arm harder, nearly lugging it out of the socket.

The two were running down the deserted street a second later. Hiccup nearly tripped over the deep cracks that spread out like veins in the concrete. But the hand held onto his arm like a vice.

Before Hiccup knew it, they'd run four blocks away from the center. Then, taking a sharp left, the stranger brought him to an abandoned butcher's shop.

How appropriate.

"Here; we'll rest here for the night." The person stated, leaving no room for discussion. Not that Hiccup would've protested; with the exhaustion seeping into his bones, he would've gladly slept in a junkyard.

But much like fire leaves ashes in its wake, a small worm of paranoia not unlike squirmed in Hiccup's chest. What if this guy had only saved him to kill him personally?

"Who are you?" Hiccup asked, doing his best to keep the tremor out of his voice.

In response, the person threw his head back and began to laugh hysterically. Hiccup shrank back, pressing himself against the wall. Finally, mercifully, the person stopped and wiped his eye. "Oh, Hiccup, I'm hurt. How could you forget me?" The person reached into his duffel bag, extracted a flashlight, turned it on, and held it under his chin.

No sight would've terrified the thin Viking more. "Dagur?!"

The 'deranged' boy granted him a wide, toothy grin.

* * *

><p>The two boys weren't even aware of it, but just a block away from their temporary home, Ted Wiggins was hiding. He sat in a computer store (go figure) with his flashlight hanging upside down. In his hands were all the photos he'd taken with his waterproof camera during the year.<p>

No, he wasn't a photographer. He was actually in charge of the yearbook, but instead of leaving the pictures at school, he carried them around everywhere he went.

The ones of a certain cheerful redhead, anyway.

"Audrey..." For the first time that night, Ted cracked a smile. He reached out and touched the photo of Audrey chatting idly with friends, completely unaware of his presence. How would touching her skin feel? Would it be as soft and smooth as he imagined? Or would it be more refined still, like a silk so fine only a queen could ever wear it?

Ted sighed, closing his eyes. Audrey was an angel; she didn't deserve to be stuck in this hell of a situation. Well, none of them did except that lunatic Dagur. But Audrey _especially_ didn't deserve it.

Ted gritted his teeth. He'd find her. He'd track her down and protect her from whatever student would decide to play the game. If he couldn't save himself, he could at least save the girl he'd been crushing on for...well, ever.

The door clicked. Ted gasped and spun around as someone stepped in the dark store.

Without even thinking, the boy switched off the flashlight, hiding him from this intruder. He reached into his bag, grabbed the weapon he'd managed to find, and pressed a button. Blue electric sparks flashed.

"Who's there?!" He shouted.

The person stopped and pointed his own flashlight at Ted. The latter winced and covered his eyes at the sudden light in his eyes.

"Ah, Wiggins, it's only you." A male's velvety voice spoke impassively.

Ted growled and pressed the button again. More sparks flew out. "I said, who's there?!"

The person held the flashlight to his own face, revealing a flawless face, auburn hair with sideburns, and green eyes.

And a charming smile that would make any woman swoon.

Ted's throat went dry. "Hans."

Hans turned the flashlight to Ted once again, who grimaced and shielded his face. "Were you going to kill me with that stun gun, Wiggins?"

"Huh?" Ted glanced at the weapon in his hand and blushed. Putting it

down, he said, "Sorry. I-I was never friendly without your thirteen siblings, but you're okay."

"So I can come in?"

Ted paused before nodding. "Sure. Come on in."

Hans flashed his smile again as he fully entered the room, closing the door behind him. Ted turned his flashlight back on and made room for the prince, who sat down with undeniable grace. Hans' eyes sparkled at the photos; he grabbed a handful of them and held them closer to his face. "Ah, I see someone has a crush!"

"What? Ah, no, no, no! They're for yearbook, that's all." Ted denied as he snatched the pictures back and stuffed them back in his wallet - away from Hans' prying, unwanted eyes.

"So, this is the weapon you found, eh?" Hans asked as he held up Ted's stun gun. Feeling like a kid with a tricycle while everyone else owned a million-dollar motorcycle, Ted grinned nervously. "Not really helpful, huh?" He reached out to take it, but Hans widened the distance. "Not necessarily." Hans pressed the same button Ted had, making blue sparks dance in the blackness. "One shot at someone with a bad heart, and they're as good as dead."
>As he said this, Hans eyed the gun thoughtfully, as though imagining the number of classmates he might take out.<p>

Ted shivered a little. "Have you used one before?"

Hans turned to him, triggering a giggle. "What am I saying? Of course not!"

The two shared a good hearty laugh, and just for a moment, everything was fine.

Normal.

"Here." Hans held the gun out to Ted, but when the latter tried to take it, Hans grabbed him by the wrist. With a gasp, Ted tore his wrist free and clambered to his feet. Hans did the same, without the clumsiness.

Ted could feel the prince's minted breath on his neck. "Hans, NO!"

Hans made a grab for the boy's shirt, but Ted swerved. Hans lunged at him, but Ted ducked and made a wild spring for the door. "STOP!"

A weight was thrown on him. Before Ted realized it, he was lying on his stomach on the floor. Hans was on top of him, a hand knotted in the brown hair.

The other hand was holding an old-fashioned razor. The sharp end dug into Ted's neck, cutting the flesh as though it were butter. Warm blood freely spilled out, and Ted tasted metal on his tongue. Ted tried to squirm free, but Hans held him down.

"Well, look at this, Wiggins. This is my weapon. Do you like it?" Hans said casually, as though the two were drinking coffee together. "I thought it was a bit shabby, but now, I'm beginning to see its

benefits." He grinned, revealing two rows of perfect white teeth. "Did you see how Kristoff kicked the bucket earlier? All it took was one wrong move, and he wound up with a dagger in his forehead."

Ted's pants turned to gurgles, and blood dribbled down his chin.

"That's not my scene." Hans shook his head, his eyes glinting. "I'LL NEVER DIE LIKE THAT!"

In a flash, Hans finished his act.

Ted cried out and lay on the floor, his face contorted in pain and his throat slit like a trout's.

4. Chapter 3: Siblings

Recap

_ "W...w..." Hiccup swallowed as his forest-green eyes darted at Ruffnut's still form. "Why?! Why did you kill her, Fishlegs?! She never did anything to you!" _

_ "I..." Fishlegs' lip quivered. "I'm the first one everyone's gonna try to kill!" _

_ A shadow appeared behind him, a black silhouette against the full silver moon. _

_ "Yaah!" The figure cried - in a male voice - as it swung a fist across Fishlegs' head. _

_ "Who are you?" Hiccup asked, doing his best to keep the tremor out of his voice. _

_ The person reached into his duffel bag, extracted a flashlight, turned it on, and held it under his chin. _

_ "Dagur?!" _

_ Ted could feel the prince's minted breath on his neck. "Hans, NO!" _

_ Hans made a grab for the boy's shirt, but Ted swerved. Hans lunged at him, but Ted ducked and made a wild spring for the door. "STOP!" _

_ A weight was thrown on him. Before Ted realized it, he was lying on his stomach on the floor. Hans was on top of him, a hand knotted in the brown hair. _

_ The other was holding an old-fashioned razor. _

_ "Did you see how Kristoff kicked the bucket earlier? All it took was one wrong move, and he wound up with a dagger in his forehead. _

_ "That's not my scene." Hans shook his head, his eyes glinting. "I'LL

NEVER DIE LIKE THAT!"_

In a flash, Hans finished his act.

* * *

><p>Chapter 3: Siblings

The moon had nearly completed its path across the navy sky by the time Fishlegs regained consciousness. The entire right side of his face felt like frozen cookie dough: almost numb, soft, and cold. But within the coldness were tiny pinpricks of fire.

All in all, the overweight boy felt dreadful.

A long, slurred groan escaped his throat like a mummy's tomb being forced open. He blinked several times; with each blink, his eyesight sharpened.

And he could see that Hiccup was gone. The only evidence that the boy had been there at all was the bloodstain on the concrete. The drying puddle was dark red, verging on black.

Like the night. Like Tsar Lunar's heart.

Fishlegs moaned again as he forced himself to sit up. He rubbed his sore face, making bolts of pain come alive in his cheek. He winced, but he continued to massage it. As he did, he kept thinking about his escaped prey.

Hiccup was gone. Really, really gone. Someone had rescued him.

Fishlegs didn't know whether to feel cheated or pleased at the news.

_ 'Oh, well.' _ Fishlegs thought in a pitious attempt at consoling himself. _ 'There are seventeen other students to choose from. I can pick off any of them instead.' _

_ "You did a really shitty thing just now. You killed one of your friends because you let fear get inside your head." _ Hiccup's voice, as hard and acute as a sharpened dagger, echoed in his mind.

Fishlegs yelped and jumped back, but nothing could distance him from himself.

"Thor..." Sobs clogged Fishlegs' throat. He hid his face in his hands. "Thor, what am I doing?!" He whimpered like a kicked puppy as he rocked from side to side. Hiccup had been right. Everything he'd said was true. Nobody was out to get him: his own terrified mind had fabricated the scenario.

Fishlegs continued to quietly cry to himself. He was so absorbed in his own emotions, he didn't hear the almost muted footsteps coming towards him.

He had to get out of here. Like Hiccup had said, there may be a way out of this wretched city. All he had to do was look.

But he couldn't venture out there unarmed, could he?

Fishlegs reluctantly pried his hands from his sticky, wet face. His doe-brown eyes darted from one direction to the next. When all he saw was gray cement, his panic spiked again.

"W-where's my gun?" He whispered to himself.

Directly behind him, a firearm cocked. Cold metal pressed against the back of his head. "Looking for this?" A familiar male voice drawled.

BAM!

Bright red blood splattered across the pavement, mixing with Hiccup's. Fishlegs' eyes grew dull, and he collapsed on his side on the ground.

Where his head had once been, the barrel of the gun still emitted smoke. Fishlegs' killer brought it to his lips and blew on it like a cowboy from a black-and-white Western.

Only cowboys didn't have long blonde hair or helmets baring four horns.

"You..." Tuffnut's lip trembled. "You BASTARD! You stupid, stupid bastard!" He kicked Fishlegs' back as hard as he could. Anguish exploded in his toes, but in that moment the boy couldn't care less. With a fling of his trembling arm, he gestured at his sister's corpse lying several feet away. "You're the one who killed Ruff, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU?!" His voice grew louder with every word. "Answer me, pig!"

He was openly sobbing now, but his anger fueled him. "You really thought you could win, huh?! Well, because of your shitty plan, MY SISTER IS DEAD! YOU FUCKING LOSER, you loser..." Tuffnut squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head. His shoulders began to shake, and his knees gave way under him. He collapsed, face in the dirt, as he sobbed. "You fucking pig..." His hands fisted. "You got what you deserved."

He lifted his head to look at his sister once more. Rigor mortis was beginning to settle in, and the light blue eyes that'd once radiated life and joy were as empty as cut gems.

>Tuffnut brought a hand to the pendant around his neck: a baby dragon's tooth. Ruffnut was wearing one identical to his. No surprise, really; both their necklaces had come from the same dragon.<p>

As children, they'd had a similar outlook on dragons as all of Berk did now. They hadn't seen them as beasts; they'd seen them as amazing creatures. One day, the twins had found a baby Terrible Terror and taken it in without anyone, not even their parents, knowing about it. They'd fed it scraps of their food and allowed it to sleep in their beds at night. When the creature had made noise, the twins had claimed to have coughing fits.

But unfortunately, the hatchling had died mere days afterwards. With heavy hearts, Tuffnut and Ruffnut had buried the unlucky little

dragon in their backyard when their parents had been away. But before lowering the body into the ground, the twins had taken two of the dragon's loose baby teeth in remembrance of their pet.

They'd begun to wear the teeth around their necks, and in the years that had followed they had never taken the pendants off.

That had been just one of the memories that kept the two chained together. Sure, they'd had really violent arguments, often to the point of them getting physical. But the two of them had always rekindled in the end. There was nothing either of them could say that could sever their bond completely.

Tuffnut and Ruffnut were the ying and the yang of Berk. You can't have one without the other.

Tuffnut wiped his teary, dark blue eyes before crawling to his sister's corpse, the revolver still in his hand. He sat on his knees, staring at her, before gently picking her up and cradling her on his lap. With two dirty fingertips, he closed her eyes so that he could fool himself into thinking she was asleep. Then, Tuffnut pushed the bloodstained fringe from her face and kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry, sis." He whispered. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. I heard a gunshot earlier, and I never guessed that it was you. I'm sorry."

He hadn't been able to save her. But he could still be with her.

Taking a deep breath, Tuffnut took the gun and pressed the barrel against his temple. As he did this, he never tore his gaze from Ruffnut's face.

A gunshot echoed through the night, as piercing as a child's wail.

* * *

><p>Many royals would say that the best part of their social status was their wealth. Others would claim to prefer the privileged power that came with their birth.<p>

But not Elsa Arendelle. In that moment, as she crept in and out of the streets like a cat, she would have said that the best part of being royalty was being taught to walk silently.

Nobody could have heard her, even if they'd strained their ears.

Elsa pressed herself against a grimy brick wall, her ears and eyes on high alert. She did her best to breathe through her nose, and in little huffs. If she couldn't hear herself breathe, then it was extremely unlikely that anyone else would. Especially from a distance.

Her blue eyes propelled from left to right, but just like the five other blocks she'd explored tonight, there was no sign of Anna.

Where could she have gone? She couldn't have died. Elsa simply

refused to believe it. Anna may have lacked powers, but she was far stronger than she looked. She couldn't have allowed herself to be killed, at least not without a fight.

Elsa smiled wistfully. _'She's more hard-headed than I am. And better yet, she's not afraid of herself. She probably would've been a better ruler than I.'_

The queen looked down at her hands, thinking about the incredible icy power that flowed from her fingertips.

She'd been cursed with this power since birth. But thanks to Anna, Elsa had learned to manage it. Now, she was able to walk about in her own kingdom without the terror of accidentally freezing someone.

>It was all thanks to Anna, and the incredible selflessness she'd displayed.<p>

_ 'That's why I'm going to return the favor.'_ Elsa's dainty hands formed fists capable of cutting through diamonds. _'I'm going to find her and protect her from this nightmare. If it's the last thing I do.'_

Something rustled behind her.

Elsa gasped and spun around. She held her hand out, palm up, and a glowing orb of winter energy formed. Her blue eyes scanned the darkness, trying to spot the intruder.

>'Come out, come out, wherever you are.'

She heard the sound of a gun clicking. "Hey, queenie." A male voice sneered.

Elsa gritted her teeth before throwing her orb towards the voice. It hit the wall in a flash of white light and covered the wall in frost. Just for a second, Elsa saw the person's face.

Dark hair. Muscular frame. Viking helmet.

Elsa groaned. "Snotlout Jorgenson."

"The one and only." Snotlout emerged from the shadows, a shotgun in his beefy hands. He was covered in grime, as though he'd been hiding in an alley one hour too many. "What're you doing here?" He asked.

"I could ask you the same thing." Elsa placed her hands on her slim hips. "Aren't you going to stuff your cousin's head in a toilet or something?"

"Nah, I only do that on Tuesdays." Snotlout replied casually.

Elsa's jaw set. "You're the only family he has, besides his father. Why're you so cruel to him all the time?"

"'Cuz he's a runt!" Snotlout retorted hotly. The gun trembled in his hands. "I'm bigger, stronger, and faster than he is. But he's the heir! He couldn't lead his way out of a paper bag."

But there was more to it than that. Elsa could see through him so

perfectly, he may as well have been made of ice. Hiccup was indeed the runt of the litter, anyone could see that. But he had also been the one to end the war between humans and dragons. Snotlout knew that, just like he knew that no matter what he accomplished in life, it would always pale in insignificance when compared to his cousin's achievement.

The big strong Jorgenson had a chink in his armor. Well, why not widen the gap a little? Why not give the bully a taste of his own medicine?

"Last I recall, he singlehandedly defeated the Red Death." Elsa began to walk towards Snotlout. The boy stood defensively, legs slightly apart. Elsa's face was a mask of indifference. "And what did you do? Poke the monster in the eye with your shield." She snorted. "If anyone's the runt, it's you."

"SHUT UP!" Snotlout fired the gun. Elsa merely waved her hand, and an ice wall rose in front of her. The bullet penetrated the wall but failed to touch the queen.

Elsa smirked as she stepped out from the wall. She shook her head at the boy. "You truly are pathetic, you know that? Hiccup is weak, true, but he has more brain cells than you'll have in fifty lifetimes. If only one of you will come out of this game alive, I'm willing to bet my entire kingdom that you will not come forth as the victor."

Snotlout's face became the color of a beet. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Elsa was standing right in front of him now, the gun mere centimeters from her pale forehead.

"Just so you know, I've decided to play this game." Snotlout said in a shaky voice.

Elsa nodded. "So have I. So put down that weapon and let me go. Otherwise, I'll assume you want to fight and I'll hit back with every ounce of my power." Frost spread out with each step she took. Within seconds, the entire alley was covered in two-inch-thick ice. Snotlout's face had become whiter than Elsa's.

The queen smirked. "You've been warned."

Snotlout shook his head. "No!" He shouted. "You got this Christmas special of a power, but I'm the one with the gun! If I shot you in the head, you wouldn't live through it!" He was clutching at loose straws and they both knew it. He was terrified and trying to convince himself that he could somehow defeat Elsa.

"Try it, then!" Elsa challenged, taking another step forward.

Without thinking, Snotlout squeezed the trigger. The impact made him stumble backwards; the slippery ice made him lose his footing and fall on his bum. When he looked up, he saw Elsa was still standing before him.

But her head was bowed.

"A-are you okay?" He asked.

Elsa raised her head. A long gash went from her nostrils to her hairline. Blood, as precious as rubies dribbled down the otherwise perfect pale skin. Elsa lightly touched her cut and brought her fingertips to her eyes. When she saw the blood on her fingers, something shifted in her expression. The warmth and smugness evaporated from that face, giving way to complete and total iciness.

"You scarred my face." Elsa stated in monotone, holding her bloody fingers for Snotlout to see.

Snotlout shook his head as he rushed to stand. He aimed the gun at Elsa. "It's your fault! You made me miss!"

Elsa growled like a hungry snow dog. "This is so typical of you Vikings! Always pinning the blame on someone else instead of accepting any responsibility! First it was the dragons, then the Outcasts, and now me!" She held out her hand, the one free of blood. A small snowflake formed in the center of her palm. Then, before Snotlout's horrified eyes, it grew and sharpened.

In seconds, Elsa was holding a spear made of ice as long as her arm.

"Come at me!" Elsa shouted. "Every inch of me will resist you!"

Snotlout let out a chain of screams as he began to aimlessly shoot. His legs scampered backwards, trying to lead him out of the alley. Elsa swerved the bullets as she held the spear in both hands. With a shout, she threw the spear at him.

Snotlout shot at it, but it was too late. The spear penetrated his heart, pinning him to the brick wall.

Elsa stood there, panting, as she stared at her handiwork. She knew that, if Hiccup found out, he'd never forgive her. Snotlout had been an arrogant, pig-headed, ignorant bully. But he'd still been Hiccup's cousin.

Elsa bowed her head. Stray hairs slipped out of her braid and framed her face.

Who was to blame? Had it been Snotlout, who'd angered her and shot the first bullet? Was it her fault because of her momentary loss of patience?

Or was it the Tsar's fault for putting them against each other in the first place?

Elsa didn't have time to decide. Behind her, gravel crunched.

The queen spun around to see Prince Hans of the Southern Isles standing at the mouth of the alley. He didn't have a speck of dirt on him, and his hair was immaculately combed.

But there was a glimmer of madness in his eye.

Hans smiled at her before holding out a gun.

Elsa glared at him; she summoned a chunk of the ice under her feet. It flew into the air, carrying her out of the alley.

Twin gunshots pierced the air, bouncing off the brick walls.

Elsa was out of sight. But Hans decided that he didn't mind. He hadn't missed. With those wounds, she wasn't going to go far.

* * *

><p>Elsa reached the park - or at least, what used to be a park - by the time her blouse was clinging to her like a second skin. The chunk of ice crumbled away from under her feet, and she landed on the dried yellow grass. She rolled on her side as the pain consumed her. Her cheek felt like it was on fire, and her nervous system was screaming in agony.<p>

Crawling across the straw-like grass, Elsa felt her blood leave a trail behind her. But with unshaking determination, the queen dragged herself to the shore of the lake.

How unusual. Despite the destruction of the city, the lake remained untouched. It stretched out before her like a tar pit. The moon's reflection was like a great pearl in the center.

Yes. It was beautiful. Perfect for the last thing she would ever see.

Elsa collapsed on her back, panting and heaving. She could taste blood in the back of her throat, but with such a lovely sight before her, Elsa couldn't help but feel at peace.

_ 'My only regret, '_ She thought, _ 'Is that I couldn't save my sister... '_

She closed her eyes as a few tears streamed down, making clean paths on her bloody cheeks.

"Elsa? Elsa!" A familiar girl voice exclaimed. A second later, Elsa felt strong, soft hands gripping her shoulders. "Elsa, sis, what happened?!"

She knew that voice. Elsa whimpered. "God, please, enough jokes already!"

Anna whimpered. "No, El, I'm really here!"

Elsa opened her eyes to see Anna's freckled face hovering above hers. Anna's eyes scanned the damage, and Elsa could see her sister fighting back her sobs. "Wh..." She swallowed hard. "Who got you?"

"Hans." Elsa replied. "Watch out for him."

Anna hiccuped before nodding. She sat down and helped her sister do the same, keeping her arms latched around the bloody blouse. For a few minutes, the sister sat in reticence, staring at the ebony lake. They didn't look at each other, or the truth that separated and united them.

Elsa suddenly grimaced and stiffened. Anna turned to her in a panic, eyes wide. But Anna didn't see; she simply raised her eyes to the night sky.

_ 'Please, just one more minute...' _ Elsa reverted her gaze to Anna. "You..." She managed a weak smile. "You're a wonderful sister, Anna."

>Anna pulled herself together, but just barely. She nodded. "You too. You're the best sister in the whole wide world."<p>

Elsa blinked before widening her smile. "Thank y-" Her grip on her sister's arm went limp, and her head lowered.

Anna stared at her sister for a second, biting her lip, before cupping Elsa's bloody cheek and lifting it. When Elsa failed to wake up, Anna finally let her dam come down. She pressed her forehead against Elsa's temple as her body wracked with sobs. "Elsa..."

For the rest of the night, Anna sat beside the lake, holding her sister in her arms.

5. Chapter 4: Hunt or Be Hunted

Recap

Tuffnut wiped his teary, dark blue eyes before crawling to his sister's corpse, the revolver still in his hand. He sat on his knees, staring at her, before gently picking her up and cradling her on his lap.

He hadn't been able to save her. But he could still be with her.

Taking a deep breath, Tuffnut took the gun and pressed the barrel against his temple.

A gunshot echoed through the night, as piercing as a child's wail.

"Elsa? Elsa!" A familiar girl voice exclaimed. A second later, Elsa felt strong, soft hands gripping her shoulders. "Elsa, sis, what happened?!"

Elsa opened her eyes to see Anna's freckled face hovering above hers. Anna's eyes scanned the damage, and Elsa could see her sister fighting back her sobs. "Wh.." She swallowed hard. "Who got you?"

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* * *

><p>Chapter 4: Hunt or Be Hunted

The US National Anthem was the last thing Dagur and Hiccup expected to hear at dawn the next morning. As the endless sky slowly changed from tar-black to navy blue to powder blue, the familiar anthem echoed through the air like a goose's call.

As the shadows began to lighten and take cover from the light, the butcher shop's door creaked open. Dagur, wielding a switch blade in each fist, walked into the street. He walked slowly, stealthily, like a wolf hunting in the woods. He certainly looked the part as well with his leather clothes and fearsome sneer. Limping behind him, with his leg newly bandaged, Hiccup looked more like a clumsy wolf cub.

The two boys, who couldn't have been more different from each other, stood into the derelict street as the anthem continued to play. As they listened to the once-cheerful tune - which almost seemed grim to them now - Hiccup and Dagur exchanged looks of complete confusion.

"Good morning, kids!" Tsar greeted in a tone as mirthful as a carousel theme. His voice grated against Hiccup and Dagur's eardrums like sandpaper. _"This is the first of many reports I will be making! I will make two a day: one at dawn, the second at dusk."_

Dagur sighed. "Great."

"Now, here is a list of your dead classmates in the order of which they flatlined."

Back at the abandoned school, where this whole nightmare had begun, Tsar held the paper close to his face. Keeping the microphone close to his cracked lips, he read: "Ruffnut Thorston, Ted Wiggins, Fishlegs Ingerman..."

Hiccup gasped sharply, as though he'd been underwater a second too long. "Fishlegs?" He repeated as the color drained from his face. He began to shake his head from side to side, refusing to believe it. "No...no, it can't be." He turned to Dagur, suspicion clouding his eyes. "You didn't...?"

"No. I just knocked him out." Dagur replied curtly. He tucked his switchblades back into his belt. "What, you don't trust me?" He asked, actually sounding wounded by the prospect.

Instead of answering, Hiccup resumed listening to the grisly morning report.

"Tuffnut Thorston, Snotlout Jorgenson..."

Hiccup felt like someone had pulled the ground from underneath his feet.

"...And Elsa Arendelle. That makes six in total. Seven, if one counts Kristoff." A wistful sigh that only served to make Anna's blood boil. _"Pity the boy had to die before the game. He was so strong, too. He had potential."_

"Don't you ****_dare_**** talk about him." Anna hissed heatedly from her hiding spot in the supermarket. Her hold on the strap of her bag tightened until blood seeped out from between her fingers. But her anger blocked out the pain. Fresh tears sprang up in her bloodshot eyes. "You're not fit to wipe Kristoff's shoes clean. Or Elsa's!" Anna's voice cracked at her sister's name, but she didn't dare break down again.

"That is all, kids. Happy massacre!" With that, Tsar logged off, leaving a deafening silence in his wake.

It was indeed very silent. All of the surviving students felt it, even though few mentioned it. They'd all grown up hearing about this place: Lunar City, the first official establishment Tsar had created. The first place where spirits and humans had coexisted, and had proven to be able to do so peacefully. It had once been alive with the sounds of traffic, people, and sirens. It had been alive, like all the other cities in the world.

But it was nothing but a ghost town now. Not even a bird's song could be heard in this concrete skeleton of a metropolitan.

And now, the corpses' reticence only served to quieten the city further.

Dagur sighed and scratched his head with his knuckles. As he did, he undid a few frizzy, carrot-colored hairs from their tight braid. He allowed himself to bask in the silence for a moment before turning to Berk's heir. "Well, Hic..." He trailed off and raised his eyebrows.

Hiccup was on his knees, a look of total loss on his freckled face. "Fishlegs...and Snotlout..."

Dagur snorted. "Oh, please. Are ya really gonna whine over those losers?"

Hiccup's head snapped up. Where there had once been sorrow was green fury as potent as fire. "_Don't_ call them losers." Hiccup retorted in a low but venomous voice. "Fishlegs was my friend."

"Which is why he tried to blow your brains out last night."

Hiccup's face became the color of a strawberry. "Listen," With some difficulty, he got up on his feet, "You didn't know them, so shut up!"

Dagur scoffed and eyed Hiccup as though he were a dog chasing its own tail. "Seriously? You're sticking up for a fat-ass who tried to kill you?"

"Fishlegs was terrified; he wasn't in his right mind at all. He thought he was doing what was necessary in order to survive." Hiccup knew he was babbling now, but he didn't care. Dagur may have saved his life, but that didn't mean that he could spit on Fishlegs'

grave.

If he even had one. Maybe the body had been dumped in the ocean, or discarded in a junkyard somewhere.

Shaking the sickening thoughts from his head, Hiccup continued. "He was my friend, so watch your mouth."

Dagur's eyes - forest-green, like Hiccup's - darkened like the moon during an eclipse. Before Hiccup could so much as blink, Dagur's leg sprung out and swiped Hiccup's legs from the ground. The boy fell on his back with a grunt as the world spiralled around him. A shadow loomed over him, and the cool smooth metal of a blade nudged him on the neck.

>Hiccup didn't open his eyes. He'd learned from his clashes with Snotlout to never open his eyes; if he did, his tormentor would sense his fear.<p>

"You're not the boss of me, pipsqueak." Dagur's voice was bitter as wormwood. "So you're the one who'd better watch it. I may have saved your skinny ass last night, but don't forget that we're playing a game here, a game of Nature. It's hunt or be hunted. So piss me off enough and I'll gut you like a fish. Got it?"

Hiccup nodded meekly. A tiny voice whispered in his mind's ear. His own voice.

'I'm scum.'

"Good." Dagur's voice was an octave higher, which was probably a good sign. The pressure of the knife left him. Hiccup felt Dagur stand, and he reluctantly opened his eyes. It was no easy task; his eyelids felt like lumps of iron had been balanced on them. Blinking against the increasingly bright sky, Hiccup saw Dagur towering over him.

The school psycho held his hand out to the much smaller boy. "C'mon. We gotta keep moving."

His hand was as tough as leather, the result of a lifetime of training and hardships. His fingernails were chipped. There was dried blood in the lines of his palm.

But Hiccup took it anyway.

* * *

><p>"No...no no no!" Mavis Dracula's whispered denials escalated into blood-curdling shouts. Her boyfriend Jonathan covered his ears as he watched Mavis throw an empty bottle across the room. It shattered into a thousand pieces.<p>

The sound rattled Jonathan's nerves like a violin's string. Even though the couple had found shelter in one of the abandoned houses, he didn't feel any safer than he'd felt on the streets.

Why? The answer was a simple one.

Mavis, normally sweet and sassy, had been steadily sinking into a tenebrous mood since dawn. The more the sky lightened, the more Mavis's attitude darkened.

And frankly, it was beginning to scare Jonathan.

"Babe, what's going on?" He finally managed to ask. He ducked as another bottle whizzed above his head, grazing his wild red locks. It exploded on the wall behind him.

Mavis groaned. "My blood! The blood I brought from home!" She began punching the wall, creating a small crater in the avocado-colored wallpaper. "The bottles cracked on the way here. I'm not surprise; those stupid soldiers probably threw my bag around like a football! I...uuuurgh!" Mavis covered her face with her hands. "What am I gonna do?"

"Aw, Mavy..." Jonathan plucked up his courage and stepped towards her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "D-don't worry. I'm sure you'll be able to control it."

He couldn't have made a poorer choice of words. Mavis looked at him with blue eyes that could freeze the Earth's core. Jonathan recoiled as though he'd been burned.

"Control it?" Mavis repeated it as though trying to decipher a foreign tongue. "Control it?! Johnny, it doesn't work that way! Vampires aren't like humans. We can't put it off for a day or two. Sometimes, we can't even do that for an _hour_ or two!"

"Okay, okay!" Jonathan raised his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry."

Mavis blinked, and the coldness left her beautiful blues. The anger left her pallid face, leaving a very tired girl behind. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. It's just..." Mavis hugged her knees to her chest. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I'm scared, Johnny. And not just for obvious reasons. I've...I've never been without blood. Dad's always supplied me with it. I've never had to get it myself." She swallowed, as though already feeling the first signs of thirst.

"Dad's the one who taught me about it. He says that if vampires don't drink blood often...we lose control. We go back to being savages. We even kill our own family if it comes to that." Mavis rested her forehead on her knees. "And I don't wanna be that."

Several minutes ticked by, stretching out like the ghostly fingers of morning mist.

Then, a hand covered Mavis's. She looked up with teary eyes to see Jonathan kneeling in front of her, the ancient floorboards creaking under his weight. Mavis stared into those chocolate-brown irises - the eyes she'd fallen in love with - and felt some of her fear evaporate.

"If that's what you need..." Jonathan raked his hair back with his free hand. "I'll get it for you."

Mavis's eyes widened to anime proportions. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you hear what Tsar Lunar said?" Jonathan jerked his thumb at

the boarded window. "Seven of our classmates are dead. I'll go looking for one of their bodies and bring it back here."

Mavis's jaw dropped. "You're not seriously suggesting I eat one of my classmates?"

"Well, what else is there?" Jonathan asked. "I want to kill my classmates even less than you do. But if it's already dead..." He sighed and ran a hand down his face. "I know it sounds sick, but I'm offering you a carcass. Someone that was already dead."

Mavis felt her stomach gurgle, but she knew that she had no choice. She couldn't put it off for much longer, and if she lost control...the only other person here was Jonathan.

Either devour the corpse of one of her dead friends or lose control and drain her boyfriend. It was a terrible choice, but it was the only one she had.

Mavis sighed and thumped the back of her head against the wall. She stared at the ceiling, counting the spidery cracks, before finally giving her answer.

"...Okay."

Jonathan bit his lip. "Okay." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before rising to his feet. Mavis didn't move from her spot as she watched Jonathan collect the weapon they'd found: a sickle.

Like the Grim Reaper.

Well, Tsar Lunar certainly had a sense of humor.

Mavis sighed. "Can I come with you?"

Jonathan pressed his lips together as he stuffed the sickle in his bag. "I wish you could." He answered as he slung it over his shoulders. "But you can't. The sun's coming."

Mavis scoffed. "Please. I can handle the sun." To prove her point, she turned to the golden rays shining in between the boards. She held her hand out, letting it bask in the split beam.

Her skin hissed like a steak thrown on the grill.

"Ah!" Mavis retracted her hand and blew on it rapidly. She cradled her hand against her chest as she surveyed the damage. The small patch of skin that'd been touched by the light was burned to the color of roast beef.

Mavis sighed. "Shit."

Jonathan gave her a sympathetic smile. He cupped her chin, tilting her head up. When their eyes met, he gave her a quick peck on the lips. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Mavis felt sobs form in her throat, but she gave her boyfriend a nod. "Okay."

With that, Jonathan marched out of their temporary home, locking the

door behind him.

Mavis didn't move from where she stood. Her hands were curled at her sides and her eyes refused to leave her bright red sneakers.

Bright red. Like a candy apple.

Or blood. The only nutrition her body would accept.

And now, she would have to eat one of her own classmates - regardless if they'd been alive or dead - in order to nurture herself.

Mavis had been around for 118 years. She'd drunken blood the same way human teenagers consumed Coca Cola. Not once had she ever seen the thick red liquid as anything other than a source of nutrition. She'd simply accepted it as a part of her normal life.

But for the first time, Mavis really thought about where it came from.

And it made her sick.

Mavis's face crumpled. She curled up in a ball as she prayed to her dead classmates, begging them to forgive her for the awful thing she had to do.

6. Chapter 5: By the Riverside

Recap

The US National Anthem was the last thing Dagur and Hiccup expected to hear at dawn the next morning.

"Good morning, kids!" Tsar greeted in a tone as mirthful as a carousel theme. "This is the first of many reports I will be making! I will make two a day: one at dawn, the second at dusk.

"Now, here is a list of your dead classmates in the order of which they flatlined.

That is all, kids. Happy massacre!" With that, Tsar logged off, leaving a deafening silence in his wake.

Hiccup was on his knees, a look of total loss on his freckled face. "Fishlegs...and Snotlout..."

Dagur snorted. "Oh, please. Are ya really gonna whine over those losers?"

"He was my friend, so watch your mouth."

Before Hiccup could so much as blink, Dagur's leg sprung out and swiped Hiccup's legs from the ground.

A shadow loomed over him, and the cool smooth metal of a blade nudged him in the neck.

_"You're not the boss of me, pipsqueak." Dagur's voice was bitter as wormwood. "So you're the one who'd better watch it. I may have saved

your skinny ass last night, but don't forget we're playing a game here, a game of Nature. It's hunt or be hunted. So piss me off enough and I'll gut you like a fish. Got it?"_

Mavis groaned. "My blood! The blood I brought from home!" She began punching the wall, creating a crater in the avocado-colored wallpaper. "The bottles cracked on the way here.

"Dad's the one who taught me about it. He said that if vampires don't drink blood often...we lose control. We go back to being savages. We even kill our own family if it comes to that."

"Didn't you hear what Tsar Lunar said?" Jonathan jerked his thumb at the boarded window. "Seven of our classmates are dead. I'll go looking for one of their bodies and bring it back here."

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* * *

><p>Chapter 5: By The Riverside

If five summers' worth of camping - and calculating the time of day due to the sun's position - had been of any use to Jonathan, it was about eight a.m. now.

The boy treaded through the empty street, his steps as silent as a broken piano's keys. The cool wind ruffled his ginger locks and nipped at his cheeks like a hungry dog. Jonathan's eyes darted from left to right, his ears straining to detect any movement.

So far, he hadn't seen another living soul since leaving the haven. But just because he didn't see them did not mean that they weren't there. Jonathan saw them in his mind: his peers, who up until yesterday had been his friends, lurked in the shadows like rats. They had already killed six of their own. What was a seventh killing going to change?

If it guarenteed their surviving this ordeal, they'd probably hang his corpse out like a scarecrow, too.

'It's not that different from what Mavis does, y'know. People die so she can live.'

Jonathan groaned and slapped a hand on his forehead, as though the action would somehow knock the voice out.

>But the voice didn't go away. It never did.<p>

Ever since he'd first looked into Mavis's beautiful blue eyes, a small part of Jonathan's mind had warded him away from the pale, dark-haired vampire.

>The boy had spent many hours wondering what it was, exactly. Was it his survival instinct, buried deep within his core like a diamond in coal? Was it the tiny portion of fear he felt even now, whenever he saw a flash of Mavis's pearly fangs? Or was it his mother's voice

chiding him like she always had?<p>

"Johnny, don't play there! There's broken glass!...Johnny, get away from that gypsy! She'll rob you blind...Johnny, you can't go in the water yet, you just ate..."

He'd packed his bags and left the same day he'd graduated from high school.

His mother had been the Aunt Josephine of the Harker family. Always fretful of something happening, and most of her fears had sounded insane to Jonathan's ears (and most of them still did). She'd even been afraid to touch dryer lint!

Which was why Jonathan would've bet his right leg that his mother would have dragged him away if she'd ever seen Mavis.

>And in a way, Jonathan could not have blamed her for it. As much as he loved Mavis, he couldn't deny that there was something...grotesque about her. Pure horror, like fires, broken glass, snakes, and heights. Everything his mother had tried to protect him from.<p>

And now, he was living with one of them.

'You'd better find a corpse before the blood goes bad.' The voice mockingly advised him. Jonathan's fingers tightened around his bag's strap. _'Or **you'll** be the one who gets eaten.'_

"Yeah, well, I know that." Jonathan spoke out loud. There wasn't even an echo in this dead city. The morning mist seemed to swallow it. "I know that every time I hug Mavis. Every time I kiss her. I always know the risk. And you know what? I take it."

'Why?' The voice asked for the thousandth time. _'Why bother chasing after something you'll never really have?'_

"Because..." For some reason, Jonathan didn't want to answer the question out loud. He didn't want this lifeless city to know why he was willing to locate one of his dead friends' corpse, drag it back to the shelter, and allow his girlfriend to devour it. It would somehow...spoil it, like blood that's been left to fester for too long.

'...Because to love someone is to put their lives before your own.'

As if the city had been waiting for him to make such a decision, the metallic scent of blood tickled Jonathan's nostrils.

The boy perked up before breaking into a jog. The bag's strap rubbed against his shoulder, making the skin go raw. That, and the muscle he'd pulled in his knee the night before awakened. His entire knee throbbed, but Jonathan fought it. It would be worth it in the end.

>It would be worth it to see Mavis wear that smile he loved so much.<p>

But when he reached the source of the smell, his own smile vanished like a star at daybreak.

He saw his classmates, all seven of them, floating in the filthy gray

waters of Celestial River. They were all bobbing to the surface like wreckage of a sunken ship, their faces and limbs already bloated like balloons. Their hair was plastered to their heads and faces, and dried streaks of blood criss-crossed their clothing and visages.

And nearly every single one of them seemed to be staring at him.

Saliva pooled in Jonathan's mouth. He slapped a hand over his lips and spun around, shielding himself from the sight. His knees gave way under him; when he crashed down, his knee felt like someone had hammered it with a brick.

Jonathan vomited the can of tuna he'd had that morning as his body shuddered. His stomach clenched like a fist, but even when he had nothing left to regurgitate Jonathan didn't stand. He couldn't look at those familiar faces, he couldn't return their dead gapes and remember a time when those eyes had been alight with vitality.
>He just couldn't.

But what choice did he have, really?

Taking a deep breath, Jonathan wiped his slimy mouth with the back of his hand. Then, he rose to his feet as unsteadily as a newborn giraffe. His legs shook uncontrollably as he turned to face the waterlogged cadavers. Avoiding their lifeless gazes, he searched for the one closest to shore.

Elsa. The body was only a few feet away from the grassy, muddy waterside. Her platinum hair glowed faintly in the dim sunlight like a fading star.

All he had to do was crouch down and reach out.

That's what he did, ignoring the way to soft mud swallowed his sneakers and climbed up his shins.

His warm hands closed around Elsa's stiff, cold ones. The feeling sent goose-bumps crawling over his skin, but Jonathan brushed it off as he pulled. It wasn't easy at first; it was like trying to pull a brick out from under a building. Elsa's body seemed to resist him, as if resigned to an eternity in this watery grave.

But finally, it gave in. Jonathan yanked his feet out of the mud as he pulled. The mud made a loud squelching sound as it reluctantly released his ruined sneakers. A few more minutes of struggling, and Elsa's body lay on its side on the overgrown grass.

Jonathan sat down, panting like a dog, as he wiped his hot forehead. Sweat poured down his face like oil, and his shirt had glued itself to his torso like a second, filthy skin. His sneakers were soggy and caked with mud, and his feet felt numb with cold.

All in all, the once-rich heir to an enormous property felt dreadful, and he looked it too.

But it was too late to turn back now. Besides, he'd promised Mavis to bring her food. What kind of a boyfriend would he be if he failed to keep that promise? She was ticking time bomb. If she went on for too long without blood...

Jonathan didn't want to think about it. That's why he told himself that it wasn't going to happen.

Taking another great gulp of air, he rolled up his sleeves, exposing a pair of thin, pale arms patterned with thin red hairs. Then, he turned to Elsa's corpse, trying to evade her blue, empty rivet. He took her wrists and began to drag her across the grass, groaning at how heavy the bloated corpse was.

They didn't call it 'dead weight' for nothing, it seemed.

He'd barely made it to the road when all chaos broke loose.

"What're you _doing?!_" A girl's voice screeched.

Jonathan spun around so quickly his neck cried out in protest. His brown eyes widened at the sight of Anna standing on the road, a shovel slung over her thin shoulders and a look of horror on her tear-stained face.

Jonathan gaped at her, then turned his attention to the corpse he was hauling away.

The body of Anna's dead sister.

Just like that, it dawned on him. He understood why Anna had brought a shovel.

She'd come here to drag her sister's body out of the water and give her a proper burial.

And Jonathan saw himself through Anna's eyes: as a filthy barbarian with no respect for the dead, or her dead sibling.

He dropped Elsa's wrists; her arms collapsed in the tall grass like dead branches. He held his own hands up in surrender. "Anna, I-"

"You _bastard!_" Anna dropped her bag, held the shovel like a baseball bat, and swung. Jonathan yelped as he ducked. The shovel whistled past his head, making his blood chill.

Anna screamed and swung her shovel again, then again. Adrenaline kicked in. Jonathan did a cartwheel and rolled across the dirt, stopping at Elsa's corpse. He sat up and stared, terrified, as Anna towered over him. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, and he noticed the dark crescents under them. Anna glanced at Elsa's body, then at Jonathan.

He had never felt so guilty in his life.

"How could you?" Anna whispered in disbelief. "How could you do this to her? She never did anything to you!"

"N-no, you don't understand!" Jonathan shook his head as he raised his hands again. "Mavis needs food, so-"

He couldn't have picked less appropriate words. Just like that, Anna's tired sadness switched back to rage. She let out a howl as she

raised the shovel over her head. She brought it down, aiming for Jonathan's head, but the boy bolted out of the way.

The shovel smashed in Elsa's face instead.

Anna let out a high-pitched shriek. The shovel clattered uselessly on the ground. She stared at what used to be her sister's face, now caved-in and leaking blood. Anna didn't dare remove the shovel; she couldn't see what she'd done to her sister.

"E...Elsa..." Anna dropped on her knees and buried her face in her sister's side. Her shoulders shook violently. She kept whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Elsa...please forgive me..."

Jonathan felt sobs clog his own throat. Tears brimmed in his eyes as he watched the girl weep. Up until a moment ago, she'd been ready to bash his skull in with her shovel.

But it hadn't been her fault. None of this was. It was this god-awful game that had sent her mind over the edge.

In one day, Anna had lost everything: her boyfriend, her friends, her normal life, her sister. And now, she'd even lost the chance to honor her sister by giving her a final resting place.

Jonathan swallowed hard before slowly walking towards her. She didn't notice his approach at all; she was lost in her own world, a world where her last light had been extinguished.

Jonathan hesitated before reaching out and placing a hand on her shoulder.

But the moment his fingertips touched the soft material of her shirt, Anna came back to life.

"YOU!" She spun around, making Jonathan recoil. Her teary eyes burned as if lit by a deep fire within. "You did this to her! You made me do it!"

"I-I-I'm sorry!" Jonathan backed away, feeling more frightened by the second. "I didn't mean for this to happen! I only wanted to save my girlfriend!"

"To hell with your girlfriend!" Anna screamed at him. "She's nothing but a leech! A parasite! I've seen her day after day, all glowing and healthy and knowing it's because some poor soul had to sacrifice his life! She's a monster - AND YOU'RE NO BETTER!"

She tackled Jonathan, sending them both rolling across the tall grasses. A second later, Jonathan was pinned down by the throat, and a knee lodged itself in his stomach. A sweaty hand kept him down while the other punched him over and over and over.

Jonathan felt his skin break and bleed, felt the pain burn him like an icy fire. His lungs screamed for air, and black dots began to dance in his blurring vision. Much more of this and he would pass out.

That's when he realized that Anna wasn't going to stop.

He opened his mouth to shout at her to stop, but Anna took it as an invitation to smash his teeth it. The metallic taste of blood coated his tongue, and he felt some teeth fall out.

Jonathan's hand searched the ground for his bag. Luck must have been on his side, for he found it - and it had torn open.

Jonathan didn't think. He just did.

He reached inside, grabbed the sickle, and swung it at his attacker.

Anna screamed with pain as she rolled off him, the sharp blade still embedded in her.

Jonathan took a wild gasp for air, lying on his back on the grass and allowing the weak sunlight to wash over him. He breathed in and out as tears of fear, pain, regret, and relief streamed down his cheeks, leaving twin clean streaks.

A tortured gurgle made him come back to reality. With some difficulty, he forced himself to sit up. He gasped.

Anna was lying on her side, her strawberry-blonde hair spilled out behind her like a fan. Jonathan's sickle was buried in the side of her neck, all the way to the wooden hilt. Bright red blood pooled out and stained the grass, and Anna's eyes locked with his.

Jonathan recognized that look. He'd seen it many times in school, when his classmates said or did something cruel that they wished they could take back.

Regret.

Anna's lips moved, but all that came out was a few drops of blood and pained wheezes.

But Jonathan understood her.

'I'm...sorry.'

Then, Anna went limp and the light in her eyes drained away.

Jonathan sat there, panting and staring at his first killing, before scrambling to his feet and running as quickly as he could without looking back.

7. Chapter 6: Hope

Recap

Jonathan saw his classmates, all seven of them, floating in the filthy gray waters of the Celestial River.

And nearly every single one of them seemed to be staring at him.

His warm hands closed around Elsa's stiff, cold ones.

A few more minutes of struggling, and Elsa's body lay on its side on the overgrown grass.

_"What're you _doing?!_" A girl's voice screeched._

Jonathan spun around so quickly his neck cried out in protest. His brown eyes widened at the sight of Anna standing on the road, a shovel slung over her thin shoulders and a look of horror on her tear-stained face.

The shovel whistled past his head, making his blood chill.

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Anna's lips moved, but all that came out was a few drops of blood and pained wheezes.

But Jonathan understood her.

'I'm...sorry.'

* * *

><p>Chapter 6: Hope

Eugene Fitzherbert didn't hear what happened by the riverside. He'd been sleeping too soundly to even suspect that something had been out of place. But his new-found travelling companion, Heather Duchannes,

had been awake since early dawn. She sat in her sleeping bag, a worn blanket draped over her shoulders, as her jade eyes darted from left to right.

She and Eugene had set up camp in a sports store, so finding a tent and basic survival supplies had been child's play. The previous night, they had even settled down to a shared can of baked beans and microwaved hotdogs.

She'd felt so safe at first, in the company of a strong boy and within the safety of a spaced tent.

But the sounds of shouting and curses had waken her up. She'd bolted up in her bed and listened as the brief battle raged, imagining two or more of her classmates fighting like hungry street cats. Who could it be? Who would choose to partake in this awful game?

The silence that had followed had been worse than the noise.

Heather shivered and tightened her blanket around her frame. She imagined two people she'd seen every day in a classroom, doing typical things like homework, sports, or chatting, trying to kill each other with whatever weapons they'd managed to scavenge.

Friends turning against each other, killing each other, because of the slim chance of making it out alive themselves.

Heather found herself taking a gander at her companion, who had yet to awaken to this awful new world. He was wearing a white T-shirt and his brown hair was fanned out on the rolled-up blanket he'd used as a pillow. Even in the poor lighting, his handsome face looked peaceful, like there was nothing in the world that could bother him.

Did he think he could survive this game? If he did, why had he allied himself with Heather? Was he going to shelter her, safeguard her, until they were the only two participants left?
>Would he really lead her on and kill her to save himself?<p>

Heather shook her head wildly. Her raven hair whipped the sides of her face.

No. No! She couldn't allow herself to think like that. If she began to suspect her friend, she might even come to kill him.

She'd be doing exactly what Tsar Lunar wants her to do.

No. She had to stay positive and have faith in Eugene. Sure, she hadn't known him for very long. But last night, he'd not only brought her to safety but treated her wound and fed her. Why do all that if he planned to kill her?

Despite the warmth of the tent, Heather shivered. She reached under the blanket and pressed a hand on her neck, where a thick, clean bandage had been applied. Even though Eugene had gone out of his way to make her comfortable, the events of last night were still huddled in the back of her brain like a pack of rats.

And now, they were scuttling towards her consciousness, sucking her in...

* * *

><p>Heather made her way through the corridor's halls, hugging her bag like a scared child would clutch at her mother's skirts. She buried her nose in the plastic blue material as her worn boots shuffled across the polished floorboards. Each step brought her closer to the open doors, and whatever battlefield was taking place.

As she walked, Heather took a deep, calming breath. If she started to panic now, she'd be vulnerable. She had to be cool-blooded, rational, like she always was.

Holding her head up a little higher, Heather quickened her pace. The door stood gaping before her like an giant open wound.

She had to think positive. Maybe her classmates would reject the 'game's rules. Maybe they'll form a group and find a way out of this ghost town together. If she didn't have at least a shred of hope, how could she go on?

Hiccup wouldn't fight, for one. Heather remembered him from her first few days at the school. He was a quiet, shy, book-loving boy. He wouldn't kill a fly. And Anna and Audrey were the sweetest girls Heather had ever had the pleasure of meeting; they would never even try to go for the weapons.

A tiny smile appeared on Heather's face. Yes, everything would work out fine.

Then, Heather stepped out into the cool night air. The moon's indigo glow transformed the world into a domain of grays, whites, and blacks. She stood at the doorway, waiting, as her eyes shifted from left to right. A tiny worm of panic curled within her, but she squashed it as quickly as she could. Despite this, she couldn't block out the single question blaring in her ears like a siren:

Where was everybody?

"H-Heather..." A wispy voice muttered from a distance. It was so faint, Heather almost thought she'd imagined it.

Almost.

Heather reached into her bag, grabbed the flashlight, and switched it on. The light fell upon a familiar long face and four-horned helmet.

Ruffnut Thorston.

Heather relaxed a bit, but the zombie-like way Ruffnut was walking towards her put her off.

"What...what am I s'posed to do?" Ruffnut asked in a shaky voice. Her face crumpled like a soaked newspaper as she brought a hand to the back of her shoulder. When she showed Heather her hand, Heather almost jumped back.

Ruffnut's hand was coated in a thin red film of blood.

"It hurts." Ruffnut's eyes filled with tears. "It hurts so bad..."

Ruffnut collapsed on Heather, who caught her with both hands. "R-Ruff!" She cried as the additional weight brought her to her knees. She cupped Ruffnut's cheeks and lifted the girl's face for inspection. She was losing consciousness, but still alive. Her eyes pleaded Heather to help.

So Heather tried to oblige. She turned to Ruffnut's wound, right where Ruffnut had put her hand a second ago. She pulled the fabric down and felt her breath hitch in her throat.

There, right where the neck met the shoulder, was a bullet hole.

"Oh, no..."

Heather didn't have time to do anything else. Gunfire blasted through her ears, and she heard Ruffnut cry out.

Warm, wet droplets sprayed all over Heather's face and clothes. Heather shrieked and crawled backwards, her wide eyes focused on Ruffnut.

Ruffnut lay where Heather had dropped her, in a growing dark puddle. In those dimming blue eyes, Heather saw her reflection: scared, on all fours like an animal, and covered in blood.
>Ruffnut's blood.

Heather knew she'd regret it, but she still lifted her gaze.

Ruffnut had been shot in the head.

Heather looked up to see Fishlegs emerging from the shadows, a smoking gun in his fleshy hands. He let out a yell and charged towards Heather, his gun aiming at her.

"Hey, what's going on here?" A new voice cried. Heather spun her head to see Eugene come into view.
>NO!

"Don't!" Heather shouted.

BANG!

Pain spiked Heather's neck as the world spun around her. She felt blood pool down her clothes, but she could still see Fishlegs' brown shirt coming towards her at time speed.

Heather didn't hesitate. She reached down, grabbed a rock, and flung it at Fishlegs. The boy cried out as the stone hit him in the face.

_"Come on!" Eugene grabbed Heather's hand and pulled her away. Heather felt her vision begin to blacken and her neck felt like it was on fire, but she still forced herself to stay awake. But the

darkness was beginning to win._

The two of them ran blindly through the streets; their sneakers pounded on the cracked pavement like war drums, sending plumes of dust in the air like phantoms. Heather pressed her free hand over her wound in an attempt to cork the bleeding, but the smell of rust was still wrapped around her head like a smothering cloth.

"Here, here, here!" Eugene pulled her towards a dark store. "It's perfect!"

Heather didn't argue, mostly because she didn't have the strength.

"Okay, just sit here." Eugene sat her down on the counter, reached into his bag, and put his light flashlight in his mouth. Gently, he pried Heather's sticky hand away from her injury and inspected the damage. After a second, he nodded. Pulling the flashlight out of his mouth, he said, "It's okay, the bullet just grazed you. You'll be fine, okay?"

Heather only caught snatches of that, but she gave him a sleepy nod. "Good." Eugene nodded before rummaging in the bag. "Wait a second, I found some bandages and disinfectant close-by...aha!" He pulled out some bandages, which he doused in a bitter-smelling liquid.

"Okay, I'm not gonna lie: it's gonna hurt like hell."

Heather didn't complain. It couldn't be worse than discovering that one her classmates had become a murderer.

Eugene pressed the dripping wad against the wound, adding fuel to the flames. Heather bit her bottom lip as an icy fire greedily licked over the gash. She clenched her hands into fists that resulted in four crescent-shaped imprints in her palms.

After a few minutes that lasted an eternity, Eugene mercifully removed the wad and began dabbing at the cut with another wet bandage, this time soaked in water. "Okay, once you remove all the blood, all you got is a little cut." A few minutes later, Heather's neck was enveloped in thick warm bandages. "There, that should hold."

As he put the supplies away, Eugene smirked. "If that girl Rapunzel were here, she'd have used her magic hair or something." His large hands slowed down, and his expression clouded over. "I wonder where she went."

"Ruffnut..." Heather whispered in a daze. "Rufnut's dead."

"Yeah, I know." Eugene said gently. He placed a hand on Heather's good shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm sure Fishlegs didn't follow us. Just try to get some rest, I'll see what I can cook. Okay?"

Heather nodded numbly and curled up like a cat on the counter. Within seconds, she was asleep.

* * *

><p>Heather gave Eugene a soft smile and pushed a lock of

chocolate-brown hair out of his eyes. "Thank you," She whispered too softly to wake him up, "for giving me hope."<p>

Indeed, it was there and then that Heather made her choice. She wouldn't suspect Eugene, nor would she leave him or kill him. She'd stay by him and help him in any way she could.

She had to have hope in a hopeless world.

8. Chapter 7: Winner

****Hello, everyone! To the request of 'weapons', I will be adding more details regarding the corpses in the Celestial River. To the request of Demonicsis, I will also be adding the fun and loveable Jack Frost in this chapter.****

****Sorry for the delay: I've been very busy these past couple of days.****

****Also, to AnimeLover and Dr. Tom ZX, you can watch 'Battle Royale' on YouTube. Or you can read the English manga online.**

>

****Happy massacre!****

* * *

><p>Recap

Eugene Fitzherbert didn't hear what happened by the riverside. But his new-found travelling companion, Heather Duchannes, had been awake since early dawn.

_She imagined two people she'd seen every day in a classroom, doing typical things like homework, sports, or chatting, trying to kill each other with whatever weapons they'd managed to scavenge.

—

Friends turning against each other, killing each other, because of the slim chance of making it out alive themselves.

Heather wouldn't suspect Eugene, nor would she leave him or kill him. She'd stay by him and help in any way she could.

She had to have hope in a hopeless world.

* * *

><p>Chapter 7: Winner

In the area formerly known as Stellar Park, dozens of chubby, sleet-gray pigeons spread their wings and took the sky. A few stray feathers, left behind by their free masters, fluttered to the ground.

As the feathers fell to the dead, brown grass, a few of them landed on a head of pearly-white hair.

Jack Frost cursed under his breath and combed the feathers out of his hair. As he did, he noticed a white splotch on his blue hoodie that hadn't been there earlier. His realization was almost as bitter as the faint scent coming towards him.

Bird excrement.

Jack sighed. "Shit." He raised his face to the flock of pigeons. "Thanks!" He shouted in a voice dripping with sarcasm. With another disgusted glance at the spot, he froze that area with a snap of his fingers. A second later, the filthy ice crumbled away from the fabric, leaving nothing but a damp spot behind.

Despite this, it failed to bring a smile on the usually mirthful face.

Jack bent his knees slightly, feet wide apart, and knotted his hands into fists. He kept his face towards the pale gray sky; the weak traces of sunlight made his spikey hair glint silver.

"Okay, Jack." He spoke to himself. "Just think of yourself flying, then do it! C'mon, you've done it a bazillion times; you've even done it in your sleep!"

Even though most people believed that talking to one's self was the first sign of madness, Jack was something of a special case. After over three hundred years of complete solitude, both from humans and the Guardians, he'd adapted to being his own friend. And now, even with a best friend he was grateful for, Jack still hadn't gone out of the queer habit.

Besides, hearing the sound of his voice, especially in total reticence like this, helped soothe him like a warm pair of socks alleviated a pair of half-frozen feet.

But even that wasn't enough to mitigate his nerves now.

Jack took a deep breath that made his thin chest puff up. Then, he crouched down before leaping into the air like a lemur. The wind caught him like a fishing net tangles around a fish; only the yells emerging from Jack's mouth were of joy rather than fear.

He whooped and cheered as he soared through the air like a paper airplane, finally relishing in his triumph over gravity.

But we all know it, and now, the 318-year-old teenager learned it: gravity always wins.

Suddenly, as if someone had severed the strings that kept a marionette on-stage, Jack felt his powers leave him. His gliding turned into tumbling, and the gravitational force was back with a vengeance.

Jack's cheers transformed into screams as he crashed into a skeletal tree, his limbs tangling in the bare branches.

In the distance, he could hear crows cawing. Laughing at him.

Without looking up from the bark inches from his face, Jack showed

the crows his fist, middle finger firmly raised. Then, he groaned as he lifted his head. He felt a rush of cold fire on the side of his face, and warm liquid streamed down his cheek and plopped from his chin. Jack didn't panic; he merely waited. A few minutes later, and the cut had sealed.

But the pain hadn't gone away yet. Physical suffering always persisted, even if his flesh knitted itself back together and his bones snapped back into place. The anguish burned in patches all over his body, like someone had covered his skin with glowing embers.

And for someone who hated warmth, this was an especially repulsive feeling.

Loose white hairs drooped in his eyes. With a grimace of annoyance, Jack flicked them out of his face. Then, with a quick readjustment, he positioned himself into a relatively comfortable sitting spot. It helped extinguish a few of the embers; a few more moments and he'd be free of them.

As he folded his thin legs, Jack felt the now-familiar cold metal digging in his neck's tender skin.

Jack huffed in distress. "Shit, I feel like a dog with this thing on." He fingered the metal collar as Foxglove's words echoed in his mind's ear:

"They're totally bullet-proof, shock-proof, and water-proof. They're also permanent, so if you win, this'll be a souvenir, I guess...But they're not just for decoration. Like I said before, if someone doesn't die every twelve hours, we'll find out because the collars monitor your vital stats. All we'll have to do is push a button and...BOOM!"

"Boom." Jack echoed with a shudder. He tightened his hold on the collar, whitening his knuckles. Oh, how he wished he could just tear it off and be done with it! But his survival instinct screamed at him to stop, and he listened to it. He didn't want to explode like a firecracker. Who would?

>Well, it wasn't entirely impossible for it to happen. Foxglove had been very specific. If there wasn't a new casualty ever twelve hours...<p>

"That's right; all the collars will automatically explode, and no one will win!"

"Yeah, some victory that would be." Jack absent-mindedly kicked at some loose bark. Personally, he didn't see what was so great about 'winning' by this game's standard. Even if you got to go home, how could you face your family? How could you look your ex-friends' relatives in the face?

Jack knew he couldn't play. Even if he wanted to, he didn't think he could bring himself to take a life. Especially someone as young as one of his schoolmates.

There was especially one person he wanted to save from that fate.

Jack's pale face hardened. He whispered a name, as sweet and soft as

a cherry blossom.

"I'll find you." He muttered as he rose on the tree's sturdy branch. He gazed at the horizon of dead brown grass and blackened trees, with a desolate playground abandoned to the forces of nature. The park was trimmed by the wired black fence and gate, most of which was gathering bright green moss. Beyond that, decaying glass and steel buildings that stood ominously in the mist like silent guardians whose intentions had not yet been made clear.

"I swear to God I'll find you."

A twig snapped.

Jack's ears twitched like a dog's.

>In the blink of an eye, he was on the ground, his back pressed against the tree's black, rough bark. He felt his heart hammer against his ribcage like a horse's galloping hooves. Footsteps, as loud as clapping thunder, approached his tree. They were slow, cautious steps; the person was every bit as afraid as Jack was.<p>

And somehow, that helped eliminate some of the winter sprite's.

Jack dared to peek, knowing full well that it could cost him a bullet in the eye.

The footsteps quickened, as if his unknown visitor had convinced himself that he was alone. A shape stepped out from the rusting slide, and Jack recognized him in a heartbeat.

Well, her.

The girl was more or less Hiccup's height, a good two inches shorter than Jack. Blonde hair; mostly tied back in a messy braid, but the fringe was combed over the left side of her forehead. She wore a tight green shirt and a leather brown shirt, and black leggings underneath. Her furry boots were dripping with mud and God knows what else.

Jack would've recognized her anywhere. She was Hiccup's neighbor, as well as former crush.

>Astrid Hofferson.<p>

She was something of a lone wolf, much like Eugene Fitzherbert (whose mere thought was enough to make Jack gnaw on the insides of his cheeks). But while Eugene spent his free time stealing and committing petty crimes, Astrid spent every available minute perfecting her fighting skills. She was also one of the smartest kids in class, right next to Fishlegs and Hiccup.

Oh, and she had a temper like a bear with a bee in its ear. That detail stuck out a lot, too.

But was it enough to make her take down one of her classmates? Especially someone she'd barely exchanged two words with?

There was only one way to find out.

Jack inhaled deeply before stepping out. He walked slowly,

deliberately, so that she would hear his footsteps and see who was approaching. As he closed the distance between them, Jack observed Astrid's body language.

When she first heard movement, she'd spun around with an axe larger than her head clutching in her hands. Then, when she'd recognized the blue hoodie and white hair, she'd lowered it slightly. But her feral expression had never changed, and her posture hardly relaxed.

Not a good sign.

"Hey." Jack called out in an attempt to break the ice (ha!). "Er, how ya doin'?"

Astrid let out a holler and raised her axe again. She charged towards him.

Jack barely had time to bolt sideways; she was faster than he'd realized. The axe whistled in his ears, and the glinting metal was far too close for comfort.

The axe embedded itself in the cracked earth. Astrid cursed under her breath as she tried to lodge it out.

"Astrid, what're you doing?!" Jack demanded. "Are you actually playing this fucking game?"

"I didn't swing the axe for fun." Astrid finally freed her axe and approached him again, their blue eyes locking. "Didn't you hear Tsar Lunar? We're supposed to fight until only one's left. That someone's gonna be me."

Jack laughed bitterly. He knew that he'd signed his own death warrant, but he didn't care. This was too hurtful and too ridiculous to provoke any other reaction. "Yeah, sure. You." He taunted. "You don't even have a power. I heard the rumors, y'know. Everybody in your family had some kick-ass power except you." He arched an eyebrow. "Is that why you work so hard at everything, Astrid? To prove that you're not worthless like your family thinks you are?"

Astrid's face became the color of beetroot. "SHUT UP!" She swung her axe again, this time with twice the energy she'd displayed before. Jack yelped and squawked as he ducked. The blade always missed, but it did claim a few of Jack's hairs.

And he couldn't fly away. That part screamed in Jack's ears, encouraging him to make up for it by moving swiftly.

But Astrid had had more training with this weapon, and she was angry. Combine those things together, and what do you get?

A slice across the chest.

"Aaagh!" Jack tumbled on the ground as pain twice as strong as before sizzled in his chest. He was on all fours now, his back to Astrid. He pressed a hand against his chest, feeling blood slip through his fingers and stain the ground.

Astrid grinned at the sight of blood on her axe. "That was just the

appetizer." She gave him kick in the ribs. Jack let out a choked gasp as he collapsed on his back. Astrid stood over him, axe raised over her head. "This is the main course." Her eyes locked with his, and they held the confirmation to Jack's fears.

She was too far gone to be reasoned with now. Whatever was motivating her to fight, it was more potent than any words he had to offer.

She was Astrid, the Flower of Death.

Astrid brought the axe down...

...but it stopped centimeters from Jack's scrunched-up face. Astrid's eyes widened as she stared at whatever had saved the sprite's life.

His hand, covered in a diamond-like layer of ice, was gripping the axe's blade. Jack stared at the blade with surprise in his eyes before turning to Astrid. The look in his eyes was darker than tar and colder than frozen nitrogen.

A sneer appeared on his lip as he tightened his hold on the axe. Then, as easily as one might pick up a pencil, he threw the axe aside. The familiar wooden handle flew out of Astrid's hands, leaving bright red marks. It skidded across the dry earth before stilling ten meters away.

Astrid's jaw nearly dropped to her clavicle. She stared at the weapon for a second before reverting her gaze to Jack's hateful glare.

Her own sneer returned.

With the swiftness of a cheetah, she leapt towards the axe. Jack followed suit; as he did, he slammed a hand against the hardened dirt. It only took half a second, but Astrid saw it from the corner of her eye. Jack's palm glowed winter blue, and the light shifted into the earth; then, a single spike of frost tore through the ground.

And through Astrid's thigh.

The earth drank her blood.

Astrid let out a shriek as she collapsed on her side. Her hands covered the bleeding puncture, but it was of little use. For the first time, Astrid's pale face lacked anger and blood-lust.

Jack recognized that emotion. He'd seen it in the river, where he'd gone to refill his water bottle. It'd been printed on every single corpse floating in its grimy waters. He remembered seeing it on his own face, in the cracked reflection of a broken window.

Fear of dying. Fear of suffering.

Jack's expression hardened, as did the ice armor coating his arms. Calmly, he walked to the axe and picked it up. With his other hand, he traced the blade, admiring how sharp it was. A few dots of his blood was still staining the steel surface.

If Astrid had had her way, a lot more would've been on the blade by

now. It might have even been dripping with his blood.

And up until two days ago, they'd been friendly classroom acquaintances.

Jack walked back towards Astrid, who'd torn off the hem of her shirt and was tying it around her wound. She didn't even notice the shadow fall over her.

Jack kicked her in the stomach.

Astrid let out a choked gasp as she fell on her back, her eyes squeezed shut. When she opened them, she saw Jack standing over her, his foot planted on her stomach.

Her own axe, in the hands of Jack Frost, was being pushed against her neck. Not enough to harm but enough to still her.

Astrid felt her heart flutter in her chest like a hummingbird's, but her life-long stubbornness took over. Her expression of terror quickly gave way to a bitter smile. "Go on." She jerked her chin at the blade, looking right into those icy eyes. "Do it. Slit my throat. Dump my body in the river like the others'. Be a winner."

Jack's jaw tightened so much his muscles went numb. He pushed the blade a little closer to the sweaty pale skin. A single drop of blood, as plump and bright as a ruby, formed and rolled down her throat.

The word came out like the wind blowing through autumn leaves. "Not a winner like you."

With that, Jack plunged the axe into the earth less than an inch from Astrid's face.

Then, he spun on his heel and ran out of the park.

9. Chapter 8: Only Silence

Recap

Jack whooped and cheered as he soared through the air like a paper airplane, finally relishing his triumph over gravity.

But we all know it, and now, the 318-year-old teenager learned it: gravity always wins.

Jack knew he couldn't play. Even if he wanted to, he didn't think he could bring himself to take a life.

There was especially one person he wanted to save from that fate.

"I swear to God I'll find you."

A twig snapped.

Jack would've recognized her anywhere. She was Hiccup's neighbor, as well as former crush.

"Hey." Jack called out in an attempt to break the ice (ha!). "Er, how ya doin'?"

Astrid let out a holler and raised her axe. She charged towards him.

"Astrid, what're you doing?!" Jack demanded. "Are you actually playing this fucking game?"

"I didn't swing for fun. Didn't you hear Tsar Lunar? We're supposed to fight until only one's left. That someone's gonna be me."

A single spike of frost tore through the ground.

And through Astrid's thigh.

Her own axe, in the hands of Jack Frost, was being pushed against her neck.

"Go on." She jerked her chin at the blade, looking right into those icy eyes. "Do it. Slit my throat. Dump my body in the river like the others'. Be a winner."

"Not a winner like you."

With that, Jack plunged the axe less than an inch from Astrid's face.

* * *

><p>Chapter 8: Only Silence

Jack ran five full blocks without taking a break, even when his knees creaked like rusting gears and his lungs caught fire. He didn't stop running even as patches of sweat formed on his back and face, plastering his silvery hair to his forehead and temples.

Jack didn't know what he was running from, exactly. Was he trying to escape any other kids who'd made the same decision as Astrid? From Astrid herself? From the game?

He didn't know, but that didn't slow him down.

Jack didn't stop until his bare feet, now bloody and scratched, tripped over a fallen lamppost.

Jack yelped as he lurched forward and rolled across the pavement. He landed flat on his face, his arms and legs spread out like a frog in biology class. He lay there for a few seconds before groaning and forcing himself to stand. The moment his bleeding soles touched the sidewalk, it sent forks of pain shooting through his legs.

Jack cried out and collapsed again.

'Why...why aren't I healing? I should've healed by now.' With his cheek still pressed against the cracked cement, he shifted his gaze to his foot. The sole was battered and bleeding like something killed crossing the highway, and his pinky toe looked ready to fall off.

Great. Just fucking wonderful. Here he was, out in the open and as vulnerable as a baby bird in a snake's nest.

Jack shuddered. Astrid's snarling face sailed across his mind's eye, and his ears rang with her scream of rage.

Slowly, as though his limbs had been replaced with planks of rotting wood, he brought his hand to his face.

What was he going to tell Hiccup? That the girl that used to be his screensaver had decided to play the game? That she'd already tried to hack him to pieces? Despite all his sarcasm, Hiccup was a very sensitive kid; he'd be crushed.

But he was going to find out sooner or later anyway, wasn't he? He may as well hear it instead of being forced to witness it. Right?

Jack stiffened, and his ears twitched like a rabbit's.

Footsteps. In the distance, Jack could hear boots coming towards him.

Jack felt a draft make its way into his heart. Astrid!

With another moan, he tried to push himself off the ground. He felt the delicate skin of his feet break and spit fire, but he gritted his teeth and pushed on. He made it a few feet before his lower legs began to grow cold - and not in the good kind of way.

Jack forced himself into an alley, surrendering himself to the shadows and praying that they would keep him hidden. He huddled away from the morning sun's bright rays and deeper into the cool darkness. As he did, a familiar velvety voice purred in his ear.

"What goes together better than ****cold**** and ****dark****?"

For perhaps the millionth time, Jack found himself pondering over it. He knew that Pitch was fear itself, a force not to be underestimated. If anything, Pitch had proven himself to be even more deadly than the Guardians had anticipated. If what Tsar Lunar had said was true, then Pitch had managed to blanket most of the world in fear and was quickly closing in.

But what if Jack had agreed to ally himself with the Boogeyman? Would he be here right now, injured and hiding in an alley like a sewer rat?

He would never know. Especially now that the footsteps were growing louder.

Jack pressed himself against the moist brick wall, praying to every diety he could think of.

'Please don't let it be a foe. Please, please, please. I can't die, not now! There's someone important to me. There's someone...'

"Hey, remember that time we went swimming and I tried to drown ya?" The approaching voice asked before exploding into peels of

laughter.

Jack winced. Dagur! He couldn't have imagined a worse person to show up. If he found the winter sprite here, incapable of escaping...

"Y-yeah. Uh, great times." A different voice, slightly nasal, asked in a nervous tone.

Jack's terror quickly transformed into joy. Hiccup!

But what the hell was he doing with the school psycho?

Ah, well. The questions could wait.

Jack cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled as loud as he could. "HICCUP!"

The footsteps stopped, and he heard the giveaway click of a pistol. A cold, bony hand grabbed Jack's heart and gave it a squeeze, but he didn't dare move.

>"Hey, what're you doing?" Hiccup demanded. "That's my friend!"
"Yeah?" Dagur challenged. "Like the guy who almost blew your brains out last night?"

>"Are we really going back to that?! He was scared shitless! He-okay, you know what? I'm not gonna stand here and argue with you while my friend's in pain." With that, Jack registered more footsteps coming towards him.<p>

A minute later, a small, thin form framed the alley's illuminated entrance. Jack had never been so happy to see his friend. "Hic." He greeted with a smile.

"Jack?" Hiccup took a few steps closer before breaking into a run. A second later, he was kneeling before his friend. Forest-green met icy-blue, and were brimming over quickly.

>"Oh, Jack...I thought you..." Hiccup didn't dare continue, as if karma might hear him. Instead, he wrapped his arms around his friend like a long-lost brother. Jack froze (ha!) before smiling and returning the gesture.<p>

Someone behind Hiccup cleared his throat.

The two friends pulled away to see Dagur standing a few feet away from Hiccup, as if afraid that affection was contagious. Jack noticed that one of the duffel bags they'd been given was slung over Dagur's muscular shoulder. The gun still in his hand, Dagur said, "If you two girls are done, I'd like to get back to the shelter before we meet anyone else."

>Oh, Lord. Why was Hiccup teaming up with this guy again?

Hiccup and Jack shared an eye-roll before the former spoke. "C'mon, I'll help you up."

"Oh, uh..."

Hiccup stopped in the action of standing up. "What?"

"I can't walk." Jack lifted one of his bleeding feet for Hiccup to

see. With a tiny smirk, he added, "I think I lost my glass slippers somewhere."

Hiccup took one look at the wounded foot and grimaced. "Ouch." He sighed and ran a hand through his auburn hair. "Okay, I'll see what I can do for ya once we get back." He wrapped an arm around Jack's waist and tried to hoist him up. But when he tried to lift his friend, he found that he wouldn't budge. With a few grunts, Hiccup tried again with no success.

"Oh, for Odin's sake!" Dagur dropped his duffel bag and marched towards the two other boys. He grabbed Hiccup's leather vest and tore him away from his friend. Then, ignoring the black look Jack was sending him, Dagur grabbed him by the arms and yanked him to his feet.

Needless to say, Jack screamed in pain.

"Wimp." Dagur pronounced.

"Dickhead." Jack shot back.

Dagur's face went as purple as the Cheshire Cat's. He pulled a fist back when Hiccup stepped in, a stern expression on his freckled face. "Okay," He handed Jack a rusty pipe. "You can use this to walk until we get back. Is that alright?"

Jack accepted the pipe with a nod. "Yeah, great. Thanks, bud."

Dagur mockingly mimicked Jack, which Hiccup either didn't notice or ignored. "You're welcome. Now, come on." Dagur collected the duffel bag, eyeing Jack like he was something that a cat had spat up.

Just as the boys were about to step out of the alley, a girl's voice echoed through the street. "Guys! Hey, everybody! Stop fighting!"

"What in the name of Thor...?" Hiccup drawled.

Dagur's eyes twinkled, and a manic smile appeared on his face. "I gotta see this." Without waiting for a response, he raced out of the alley and towards the voice. Jack and Hiccup shared a look before running after him (or, in Jack's case, hobbled).

As the three boys darted through the uncouth street, the girl's voice grew louder. As he listened, Hiccup realized that whoever it was must have been utilizing a megaphone.

"Everybody, stop fighting each other! This is Audrey Miller! I'm at the flower shop on 23rd Street! Please join me!"

Dagur skidded to a stop at the intersection, right where 22nd Street ended and 23rd Street began. Then, pulling out his gun once again, Dagur raised an arm. Hiccup and Jack got the signal and fell silent. Dagur pressed himself against the wall, holding the pistol to his chest. Hiccup and Jack knew better than to do otherwise. The three boys listened as the girl continued to shout.

"I repeat, I'm at the flower shop! Please, come here! I don't wanna fight; I just wanna talk! We can work something out!"

_ 'Finally, someone reasonable.' _ Hiccup thought grimly.

"Idiot." Dagur muttered.

That set Jack off. "What is your _problem_, dude?"

"Besides you, Frosty?" Dagur retorted. He jerked his thumb at the street. "I'm not the one risking my neck."

Hiccup frowned. "What do you mean?" There was a slight tremor in his voice.

"Uh, hello?" Dagur stared at the two as though they were idiots. "Haven't you seen how some of our 'friends' have been acting? Not everybody wants to play nice out here!"

Jack blanched as he recalled Astrid swinging her axe, her face a mask of hatred. "Dagur's right." He breathed, catching the other boys off guard.

Hiccup shook off his surprise as he said, "If Audrey's in danger, it's all the more reason to go to her!" He began to run before Dagur grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him back like a fisherman reeling in his catch. "Unarmed?"

"Fine; gimme your gun, then!"

As the boys argued, someone else slithered his way down the street. Dressed in a simple white button-down shirt and black dress pants, he looked like a young noble instead of a killer.

As he walked, Hans noticed the trio and grinned a smile that made women swoon. After he was done with that little redhead, he'd deal with these twits, too. Victory was in the bag. With that, he broke into a jog.

At the flower shop, Audrey lowered the megaphone from her lips, which were sore from all the times she'd nibbled on them today. Her eyes scanned the horizon, squinting against the strengthening sunlight. Would anybody show up? This city was pretty big; chances were, nobody was close enough to hear her call. But what if they were? Were they just going to ignore her and play anyway?

...No. It couldn't be that way. Not _everybody_ must've chosen to play.

She had to have hope.

Audrey brought the megaphone to her mouth once more. "Guys, come on! I know you don't want this! We have to put our heads together and find a way outta here! We can do it!"

Hiccup couldn't hold it in anymore. Breaking free of Dagur's hold, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "GET OUTTA THERE!"

Audrey's heart leapt in her chest. Was that...Haddock? She didn't care what he'd said - someone had answered her. That was all that mattered.

>With newfound energy, she yelled in the megaphone again. "Hiccup,

please come here! I know you wouldn't kill someone, please join my cause-"<p>

Bangbangbangbang!

Blood splattered on the pavement. Audrey cried out as she collapsed to the ground, the megaphone slipping out of her hands. The gunshots echoed in the air, bringing with them a deafening silence.

Hans didn't move from his hiding place, but his brows knitted together. Who could've...?

Astrid emerged from the shadows, an AK-47 in her pale hands and a smirk on her face. Flicking her bangs out of her eye, she eyed the girl at her feet. The prom queen, the most popular girl in school. So perfect in every conceivable way.

Astrid snorted. Well, what would the cheerleading squad say if they saw Audrey now? Covered in sweat and grime, with her hair in disarray, and bags under her eyes? She'd be kicked off the team in a second.

Audrey twitched before craning her neck, still pathetically clinging to her life.

Astrid smirked before kicking Audrey in the ribs. Audrey squeaked and rolled on her back, her face pale but still animated.

Well, that was going to change soon.

Astrid picked up the megaphone and blew on it before holding it in front of Audrey's waxen lips. Audrey coughed and began to whine like a beaten dog. Everyone in the vicinity heard those cries, loud and clear.

Then, Astrid let the bullets fly again, directly in Audrey's chest. Screams echoed alongside the gunshots.

Dagur went still, while Hiccup struggled to remain conscious. "Audrey..."

No. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't be. He ran forward and yelled, "AUDREY! HEY!" He waited for a few painful seconds, but when no one replied, he shouted again. "Tell me it's not true! AUDREY!"

Dagur lightly punched Hiccup's arm. "The killer'll come here next. Let's move." As the Berserker distanced himself, Hiccup snapped. "Go wherever the hell you want! It's your fault she's dead!"

Dagur spun around.

"Hiccup..." Jack began.

"She was a nice girl! She didn't deserve it! None of them did!" Hiccup's eyes began to water as he shook his head. "This is insane." He turned to the empty streets and any of his hidden classmates. "How can you all kill each other so easily?!"

Hans smirked from his hiding place.

_ 'How, you ask?'_ He thought to himself as he played with the blade of his sickle. _ 'The answer is a very simple one, Hiccup. How does a lion kill a gazelle? How can people kill each other during a war? How did your own people abandon runts like you, back in ancient times?'_

His smirk grew._ 'Because we can.'_

10. Chapter 9: Confrontation

Recap

Jack cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled as loudly as he could. "HICCUP!"

_ "Jack?" Hiccup took a few steps closer before breaking into a run. A second later, he was kneeling before his friend._

Someone behind Hiccup cleared his throat.

The gun still in his hand, Dagur said, "If you two girls are done, I'd like to get back to the shelter before we meet anyone else."

Just as the boys were about to step out of the alley, a girl's voice echoed through the street. "Guys! Hey, everybody! Stop fighting!"

_As the three boys darted through the uncouth, the girl's voice grew louder. _

_ "Everybody, stop fighting each other! This is Audrey Miller! I'm at the flower shop on 23rd Street! Please join me!"_

Dagur jerked his thumb at the street. "I'm not the one risking my neck."

Hiccup frowned. "What do you mean?" There was a slight tremor in his voice.

_ "Uh, hello?" Dagur stared at the two as though they were idiots. "Haven't you seen how some of our 'friends' have been acting? Not everybody wants to play nice out here!"_

Bangbangbangbang!

Blood splattered on the pavement. Audrey cried out as she collapsed to the ground, the megaphone slipping out of her hands.

_Astrid emerged from the shadows, an AK-47 in her pale hands and a smirk on her face. _

Dagur went still, while Hiccup struggled to remain conscious. "Audrey..." He ran forward and yelled, "AUDREY! HEY!" He waited for a few painful seconds, but when no one replied, he shouted again. "Tell me it's not true! AUDREY!"

_ "This is insane." He turned to the empty street and any of his

hidden classmates. "How can you all kill each other so easily?!"_

* * *

<p>Chapter 9: Confrontation

Heather Duchannes and Eugene Fitzherbert marched through the empty streets, their bags slung over their shoulders and their noses buried in their riddle books.

Above their heads, the bright sun continued its daily journey across the heavens. Its golden rays warmed them to the bone and made their shadows stretch out like prison bars.

"This is a tough one." Eugene remarked as his brown eyes scanned the pages. "I mean, I know these riddles have to be hard so we can gain the stuff or whatever. But couldn't they at least give us something that's at our level?"

Heather shrugged her slim shoulders without looking up from the riddle. "Considering the situation, I don't think our well-being was on the priority list."

Eugene gave a dry chuckle. "Yeah, that's true." He scratched the side of his head. "Damn. If this place had more supplies, I'd just take it."

Heather's thin brows met in the middle. She glanced up to stare at her comrade. In the sunlight, her jade eyes were so pale they looked otherworldly. "Sorry, but I just have to ask."

Eugene raised his eyes to meet Heather's. He waited with his entire face open, like a book ready to unveil its contents.

Heather liked that. "Why do you steal?"

Eugene's lips became a tight, thin line. He sighed and raked a hand through his silky brown tousles. "I don't suppose I could just dodge that question, could I?"

Heather's face closed like an iron gate. It looked like this book had a few torn pages in it after all. "Sorry. You don't have to tell me. I was just curious, that's all." She reverted her attention to the book. Her raven locks concealed her face like a curtain.

Eugene pinched the bridge of his nose. The two stood in silence for a few minutes, delving in the secret the boy had refused to part with.

But in truth, what harm could bring with Heather knowing? She had already shared her story with him earlier that morning over a breakfast of old bread and canned peaches. Why couldn't he do the same?

Eugene caved. "I'm not even sure how it started. At first, it was just my way to get by."

Heather peered at him through her soot-colored curls.

Eugene rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes trailing everywhere but

his travelling companion. "See, I grew up in an orphanage, so it wasn't like I had a lot in the beginning. So when I first left, all I had was the clothes on my back. I needed to eat, right?"

Heather nodded mutely.

"So, that's how it started, I guess. I stole food, and then later I stole coins. Time went on, and I found this weird..._thrill_ in stealing. I loved it when I got back home with all the goodies, knowing I'd outsmarted the people I'd taken them from. And the more cash I stole, the more of it I wanted." He shrugged his slender shoulders. "What can I say? I guess stealing's kinda like a drug: the more ya take it, the more ya depend on it."

Eugene expected to feel weird after telling someone this. He'd never shared it with anyone, especially the cops or the heads of the juvenile halls he'd been tossed into.
>But he didn't. In fact, he felt sort of good, as though he'd kicked off an uncomfortably small pair of shoes.<p>

Heather chewed on her bottom lip. After a brief pause, she said, "I never looked at it that way before."

Eugene gave her a smirk that said more than words ever could. After a second, Heather conjured up a small smile of her own. Then, Eugene brought them back to the job at hand. "So," He held up his riddle book. "You got any ideas?"

Heather blew some hair out of her eyes. "Well, let's take another look at it." Clearing her throat, she read the riddle out loud:

"I have four needles, yet I cannot sew.
>I always dance, yet I cannot walk.
I can be yellow, white, red, or blue in life.
>I turn gray when Death knocks on my door.
What am I?"

She turned back to Eugene. "Let's try to dissect this line per line."

"Bleah," Eugene stuck his tongue out. "Sounds like biology class."

Heather rolled her eyes. "'I have four needles, yet I cannot sew.'" She tapped her index finger against her mouth, eyes clouded with thought, before snapping her fingers. "Wait! A cactus has needles, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Eugene nodded, but his face betrayed his skepticism. "But that doesn't fit the rest of the poem. Cactuses don't turn gray when they die; trust me, they're the only plants I can have. And they can't go white or blue. Sure, they can be green, red, and yellow. But that's about it."

"True..." Heather's eyes suddenly lit up as if a fire had started behind them. "A flower!"

"Huh?"

"Yes!" Heather pointed at the page as though expecting the answer to magically appear. "Think about it: a needle could be used to describe

a leaf, or a petal. It's rare, but it can still be used. And flowers move when the wind blows. That explains the second line: 'I always dance, yet I never walk'."

"And flowers come in all different colors." Eugene continued, his face brightening with each word. "And some flowers go black or gray when they die." He grinned at Heather like she'd just established world peace. "Heather, you're a genius!"

A rose color dusted Heather's cheeks. "What? Ah, no..." She developed a sudden interest in her boots. "Not really, no. You'd have figured it out, too."

"No, really." Eugene patted her back. "I'm glad you're my partner."

But it couldn't last forever. Sooner or later, if they somehow managed to evade death and wind up as the last two contestants, one of them would have to kill the other. It was that or both of them dying.

They both knew it. But for now, they could ignore it.

"Come on." Eugene said softly. "Let's go to the flower shop. If the riddle book's right, there should be a machine gun there."

Heather shivered slightly. "I don't want to have to use it."

"Neither do I." Eugene answered with his heart on his sleeve. "But think of it this way: if someone decides to play the game, at least we're taking away the weapon they'd use against us."

Heather nodded, though her gloomy expression refused to waver.

Eugene sighed before tilting his head towards the road ahead. Wordlessly, the two made their way towards the flower shop.

* * *

><p>By the time Heather and Eugene reached the flower shop on 23rd Street, the sun had nearly reached its zenith. The two did their best to avoid the elephant in the room, instead focusing on idle chit-chat like schoolwork, favorite music bands, and favorite foods. If asked, neither of them could ask why they chose such trivial subjects of conversation.
Especially since, if they did end up as the last two survivors, killing each other would be a thousand times more difficult.

Maybe they did it to feel at least a little bit normal again. Maybe they couldn't stand the silence. Or maybe they were two lonely souls reaching out for friendship. Neither of them could say with certainty.

But even talk of spaghetti and meatballs, the Eagles, and the color green couldn't block out the stifling odor of blood.

Eugene and Heather stood paralyzed as they took in the sight: browning blood was doused on the sidewalk, a megaphone lay forgotten

in the corner, and a body lay directly in front of the store.

Heather's face turned three shades paler. Then, she broke into a run. "Heather!" Eugene chased after her, his eyes searching for any unwanted visitors.

Heather was kneeling beside Audrey's body a moment later. Her breath began to grow ragged as she took in the multiple gunshot wounds scattered across Audrey's sunflower-patterned summer dress. But worst of all, Heather absorbed her dead classmate's face: dotted with blood, mouth twisted in anguish, and her grass-green eyes staring at the sky without seeing it.

"No...no..." Tears plopped on Audrey's cheeks and forehead, warm against clammy flesh. Heather's dainty hands hovered over Audrey, wanting to touch her but afraid of somehow worsening the damage.

>Eugene knelt beside Heather, an arm latched around her shoulders. He stumbled over all the phrases he could say, none of which sounded right. "Heather, I..."<p>

"She was the first real friend I made in school." Heather's voice was barely above a whisper. "I mean, Hiccup was nice, but he only talked to me if Jack wasn't around or if I came up to him first." Heather's fingers entwined with Audrey's. Eugene said nothing, but his eyes never left Heather's face.

"But Audrey...she invited me over to her house for a slumber party. She asked to be my partner for a French Revolution project. She sat with me at lunch." The tears continued to fall like shattered diamonds. "And I didn't even think of looking for her now."

"You were injured. You were scared. What could you do? Run into a telephone booth and come out as Wonder Woman?"

"I didn't go looking for her. I didn't even try." Heather bowed her head. "I killed her. I may as well have shot her myself."

"Don't say that!" Eugene shook her gently. "Heather, this wasn't your fault. It's whoever decided to play the game."

Heather didn't reply, because nothing Eugene said could change her mind. No one had forced her to stay with him. She could've left the moment he'd bandaged her up.

No matter how you wanted to slice it, Audrey's blood was on Heather's hands.

With trembling hands, Heather closed her friend's eyes and folded her arms across her chest. At least this way, before she was taken away, Audrey could leave with a shred of dignity.

But who could've done this?

"Hey, what's that?" Eugene's voice reeled Heather back to reality like a fishing hook plucking a fish out of water. Heather glanced up to see Eugene rising to his feet. Slowly, cautiously, he walked towards something and held it in his hands.

"What is it?" Heather asked, almost afraid to receive an answer.

Cluelessly, Eugene held up his unearthed artifact: a small skull.

Heather's hands curled into fists. A bundle of muscle, bone, and power.

A skull. Like the kind that decorated Astrid Hofferson's skirt.

* * *

><p>The combined stench of rotting vegetation and decaying meat hung above the ground like an impenetrable fog. There was a silence that could send anyone over the edge of insanity; no sounds could be heard, not even the buzzing of a fly. The seven dead bodies floated in the greenish-gray waters, their eyes staring at a world that they could never return to.<p>

Their faces were far from recognizable now, especially with the greenish-blue color now covering their heads and necks.

But Astrid could still distinguish them. She'd recognize that burly frame anywhere, and the twins' long blonde hair was a dead giveaway.

The murderess sighed as she thumped the back of her head against the dead tree's bark. She didn't know why she'd come back here, to the site where she'd lost her mind. Maybe she was like a moth, who ran straight into the lantern despite its inevitable danger. No matter how much it would hurt, she just kept returning.

With a bloodstained hand, Astrid reached up and patted several parts of her head. Yep, those patches still burned from the previous night.

When she'd first come across this river, where her dead friends had been here waiting, she'd started screaming and crying until her voice refused to work. She'd torn her hair out until her scalp bled. She'd even waddled into the river until the soft mud reached her kneecaps and the water touched her shoulders. But when she'd tried to drag her friends out, she'd almost ended up drowning.

Then, they'd spoken to her. Astrid could hear them even now, taunting her from beyond the grave.

"Astrid! Why didn't you help us?"

"Yeah, I thought you were our friend."

"You left us here, and it killed us."

Tsar Lunar had been there, too.

"Say hello to your friends, Astrid. You'll die if you try to fight it, Astrid. Die...you'll die if you try..."

So die she would, by her own hands. But not before winning the game. Not before getting out of the arena, reaching Tsar Lunar, and killing

him herself.

Astrid took a deep breath before getting up. Slinging her AK-47 over her shoulders, she trudged her way back to the fisherman's hut. It was a convenient little place, right next to the river but far enough to evade the stench of death. It had enough room for her to be comfortable, but not spacious enough for her to be aware of her own solitude.

A few minutes later, Astrid was picking the padlock she'd installed herself. A few quick jerks, and it came loose in her hands. Flicking her fringe out of her eyes, Astrid pushed the door open. As she stepped inside, Astrid's ears picked up a faint rustling sound.

Astrid frowned and turned her head, eyes wide open. She took in the skeletal tree in front of her temporary home and bare bushes, but other than that there was nothing to see.

Astrid lingered for a moment before shrugging and disappearing in the hut. She shrugged off her bag and entered the bedroom. Well, if a small room with a bare bed and a broken mirror counted.

"Hello, Hofferson."

Astrid gasped and spun around to see Eugene step out from behind the broken mirror. A small revolver was in his hand, and it was aimed directly at her. Other than that, though, he was smiling at her as though they'd met up for a bite to eat.

Astrid immediately reached for the AK-47, but didn't draw it out. "F-Fitzherbert."

Eugene walked towards her until there was only a meter of distance between them. The revolver was still raised, ready to fire. "Oh, great. I'm so glad I found you. It took a while and a lot of tracking, but it's worth it now."

Without missing a beat, he reached out and grabbed the AK-47. Never looking away from Astrid, he pulled it out of her hand but held it in front of her face. "So, this is your weapon?"

'Stay calm, Astrid. Cold-blooded.'

Astrid nodded. "Yeah."

"It's kinda lame though, ain't it?" Eugene asked in such a mocking tone Astrid wanted to punch him.

Eugene tossed the gun away, where it crashed on the hard wooden floor. The noises were as startling as gunfire. Astrid winced, and not just because of the sound.

"So, did you hear the report this morning?" Eugene questioned. "Three of your friends are dead."

Astrid's hands curled into fists. Four crescent-shaped cuts formed in her palms. "They were all dumped in the river."

"Ah!" Eugene grinned without lowering the gun. "So you saw. Well,

I'll tell you what I saw: Audrey, shot down like a dog." He eyed the revolver in his hand as if remembering its presence. "There were a lot of bullet wounds, and set close together. Like say, from a...MACHINE GUN!"

Bang!

Astrid yelped as a steaming hole appeared in the wall less than a centimeter from her face. She stared at it with frantic eyes before turning back to Eugene.

"Astrid!" Dropping the friendly act, Eugene pointed the gun at the girl - who knew that he wouldn't miss at such a close range. "You killed Audrey Miller, didn't you?"

"Of course not!"

"But her duffel bag was missing, and I saw someone had taken the gun from the flower shop hiding spot." Eugene's eyes were brown slits. "You snuck in to take the weapon, but when Audrey showed up, you shot her. Didn't you?"

Astrid knew that she was as good as caught. But that didn't mean she had to go down easily. "That doesn't prove anything."

"Cut the crap, murderer!" Eugene's voice sliced the air like a dagger through silk. Astrid clamped her mouth shut as the boy continued, his words coming out as quickly as bullets. "Always acting like you could walk on water just 'cuz you got good grades and could work with an axe. Always acting like you were some high-ranking princess while we were peasants. I bet you murdered Tuffnut, Snotlout, and all the others too! Probably dumped their bodies in the river, too, right after you stole their stuff!"

Astrid's mask cracked like a glass put in fire. She saw her friends' dead faces in flashes, could hear their voices. Before she could stop them, tears were trickling down her cheeks.

Eugene blinked in surprise, but in that moment he was too angry to care. "Go on, cry!" He knocked her down, sending her sprawling on the ground. But that wasn't enough for Eugene. He began to kick her like a soccer ball, not caring how many ribs he bruised. "Cry and beg for forgiveness to Audrey!"

But Astrid had other plans. She rolled across the floor and rose into a crouching position. She held the AK-47 in her hands once again, her eyes gleaming with insanity.

"Yeah, you're right." Astrid purred. "I killed Audrey. Tried to kill Frost, too. But that slippery weasel managed to get away."

Eugene fired at her. Once. Twice. Thrice. Two bullets hit her: one in the leg, the other in the arm. But if anything, the pain only fueled her. She sprung into action, her finger squeezing the trigger. Gunfire filled the air as the boy collapsed. But even as smoke rose in the air, Astrid saw that her adversary wasn't dead.

She walked towards him, the gun still in hand. Eugene was bleeding everywhere, but like Audrey, he fought against the blackness. And the look he was giving her was one that the Devil himself would

envy.

"You bitch." He spat. "_Murderer!_"

"Why _not_ kill?" Astrid asked. "We're all gonna die anyway."

Eugene rushed to get up.

Astrid fired one last time, aiming at his head.

* * *

><p>Behind the dead tree, Heather's hands were clamped over her ears. But it didn't do any good: she could hear the gunshots with her mind.<p>

And she had a sinking feeling as to who they'd been directed at.

"No...no, no, please..." Heather's face crumpled as she sank to the ground, curling up in a tight little ball. As she rocked herself from side to side, all Heather could think was: why?

Why?

11. Chapter 10: Strategy of War

Recap

Eugene and Heather stood paralyzed as they took in the sight: browning blood was doused on the sidewalk, a megaphone lay forgotten in the corner, and a body lay directly in front of the store.

"She was the first real friend I made in school." Heather's voice was barely above a whisper. "I mean, Hiccup was nice, but he only talked to me if Jack wasn't around or if I came up to him first. But Audrey...she invited me over to her house for a slumber party. She asked to be my partner for a French Revolution project. She sat with me at lunch." The tears continued to fall like shattered diamonds. "And I didn't even think of looking for her now."

But who could've done this?

Cluelessly, Eugene held up his unearthed artifact: a small skull.

A skull. Like the kind that decorated Astrid Hofferson's skirt.

Astrid didn't know why she'd come here, to the site where she'd lost her mind.

Her dead friends had spoken to her. Astrid could hear them even now, taunting her from beyond the grave.

Tsar Lunar had been there, too.

"Say hello to your friends, Astrid. You'll die if you try to fight it, Astrid. Die...you'll die if you try..."

So die she would, by her own hands. But not before winning the game. Not before getting out of the arena, reaching Tsar Lunar, and killing him herself.

Astrid gasped and spun around to see Fitzherbert step out from behind the broken mirror.

She sprung into action, her finger squeezing the trigger. Gunfire filled the air as the boy collapsed.

_"You bitch." He spat. "_Murderer!_"_

_"Why _not_ kill?" Astrid asked. "We're all gonna die anyway."_

* * *

><p>Chapter 10: Strategy of War

To say that Jonathan Harker was 'worried' was like saying that the Armeninan massacre had been 'unlucky'.

The red-haired young man aimlessly walked from one street to another, his newly-found mace dragging behind him like one of Jacob Marley's chains. Every so often, he glanced at the sky and felt himself flinch each time the sun was a little bit closer to the west.

Every minute that passed would eventually lead to Mavis reawakening. He knew from experience that vampires more often than not slept during the day. And with the lack of food, his girlfriend must have been sleeping to preserve her strength.

But what would happen once the sun went down? Mavis would be fully awake, and if he didn't have something to give her...

He felt himself shudder. Swallowing hard, he picked up the pace until he was practically jogging down the abandoned street.

What was he going to do? He had no intention of returning to that wretched riverside. The bodies must have begun to rot by now. If Mavis tried to drain one of those corpses, it would have been the equivalent of pouring bleach down her throat.

Dracula had mentioned it once. Either it had been a slip of tongue or he had somehow known that Jonathan would someday need to undertake this terrible task. The young man could still hear the ancient vampire's words ring in his ears like church bells.

"Vampires need blood to survive. They can't consume human food without throwing it back up. Nor can they drink animal blood; it has to be a human's. It also must be fresh."_

"Fresh..." Jonathan felt bile try to force its way up his throat. With some difficulty, he swallowed it back down. As he continued to roam the dead city, Anna's words came back to haunt him, surely not for the last time.

"She's nothing but a leech! A parasite! I've seen her day after day, all glowing and healthy and knowing it's because some poor soul had to sacrifice his life!"

As much as he hated to admit it, Anna had been right. No matter how you wanted to put it, Mavis lived because humans died.
>Was this his last day alive, then? If he failed to bring Mavis food, would she eat him instead? Would she really throw away everything they'd built just to sate her thirst?<p>

Jonathan shook his head, trying to clear the tenebrous stormclouds. No. He couldn't allow himself to think like that. If he couldn't trust his own girlfriend in this hellhole, then he might as well choose to participate in this awful game.

'You already have.' A smug voice purred in Jonathan's ear._ 'You killed Anna. You slit her throat like a goat at the alter.'_

'SHUT UP!' Jonathan mentally screamed as he covered his ears. Not that it did any good: the voice was coming from within.

'Face it,' The voice continued. _'Your hands are stained. You're soiled. How're you gonna go back to Mavis now, huh? What about your family? Or Anna's?_'_

"I said, **_shut up!_**" Jonathan punched a rusting lamppost. His bones snapped like toothpicks and his skin split like a rotting fruit's.

Hot blood dripped down his hand and splattered on the cracked pavement, bright red amongst all of this gray. Jonathan watched it drip, fixated.

His hand hurt. In fact, it was blazing with agony. Each movement sent raw needles of anguish digging into his fingers and knuckles. His pores felt like they were spitting lava rather than blood.

But at least now his mind had other things to worry about. With the pain keeping his brain occupied, the unsettling disputes scurried into their hole like frightened rats.

Good.

"Heave ho!"

Jonathan did a full 360° spin. His brown eyes darted from left to right. The only thing he noticed was a small convenience store directly in front him.

Is that where...?

"Heave ho!" Came the combined outcries again, followed by something heavy slamming on stone.

"What the hell?" Jonathan blocked out the instinct part of his brain, the part that was screaming at him to turn around and run. Hugging his mace to his thin chest, he slowly approached the building. He couldn't help imagining a group of killers dragging a body up the stairs.

Pressing himself against the doorway, Jonathan dared himself to take a peek. He instantly felt his tense muscles relax.

Rapunzel Corona and Merida DunBroch were standing in the middle of a staircase, hauling a metal box up the steps. Both their hair was tied back, and their sweating faces were scrunched up with concentration and exhaustion. They took a few huffy pants before crying out in unison. "Heave ho!" At the last syllable, they pulled on the box again and towed it on the next step.

As Jonathan watched, his feet twitched; one wanted to step forward, the other desired to take a step back. One question kept playing in his mind like a broken record:

>Would they kill him if he revealed himself?<p>

...No. Rapunzel was one of the least violent people in the class. And while aggressive at times, Merida had never gotten into a derious dogfight.

Then again, Jonathan wouldn't have expected Anna Arendelle to attack him, either.

Once again, the young man blocked it out and stepped into view. "Hey, girls. Whatcha doin'?"

Wrong move. The moment they heard his voice, the two girls glanced up. Then, the box began to slip from their sweaty fingers. The girls cried out and tried to snatch it, but it was like grabbing a wet bar of soap.

Without a trace of hesitation, Jonathan dropped his bag and raced towards the scene. He reached the step below and nabbed the box before it could crash down the stairs.

Ten minutes later, the trio had brought the machine to the 'top floor', as the girls called it.

It was certainly 'top', at least. When Jonathan glanced out the window, he had a bird's eye view of the ruined city, dead park, and hazy sky draped over the buildings' tops. As he watched, he spotted the house he and Mavis had decided to hide in.

Jonathan shivered and looked away.

"So," Rapunzel gave him a timid smile. "What brings you here?"

"Well...I heard a noise from the street, so I came here to check it out." Jonathan riposted, squishing the pang of guilt forming in his chest. That was partly true, anyway.

>Merida glanced up from the metal box. Her sky-blue eyes were as wide and startled as a deer when it spotted a hunter. She and Rapunzel shared a nervous glance. Then, Rapunzel turned to Jonathan. "Did you see anyone else out there?"<p>

"No." Jonathan shook his head. "I haven't seen anyone all day."

Again, he was only offering them a half-truth. Jonathan could feel the fib stain his lips, but what else could he do? If he told these girls that he'd killed Anna - one of Rapunzel's best friends - they'd throw him out in a millisecond. Besides, it hadn't totally been his fault.

>Right?<p>

"Anyway," Jonathan skillfully changed the topic of conversation. "What about you girls? How'd you meet up? And what's all..." He waved his arm at the room full of electronics. "...this?"

Rapunzel and Merida shared a smile. This time, it was the redhead who answered him. Standing from her crouching position, Merida shoved some of her stubborn locks out of her eyes and put a hand on her hip. She smirked at him as though she'd gotten a higher test grade than him. "_This_ is our ticket outta this hellhole."

Jonathan raised a brow at the piles of second-hand computers, generators, and keyboards. "This? Doesn't look like much."

Merida gave small laugh. "Ye shoulda seen it b'fore."

"Yeah." Rapunzel chimed in. "We've been bringing stuff in here since yesterday."

"But why?" Jonathan asked. "How's this stuff gonna get us outta here?"

Merida grinned and sat down on the machine she'd been tweaking with. "Siddown, Johnny, and grab yer popcorn, too..."

* * *

><p>"Merida DunBroch!"<p>

The redhead took a deep, calming breath before rising to her feet. Her knees creaked like rusting door hinges. Flipping her waist-long locks over her shoulder, she made her way across the room. Like Dagur the Deranged, she walked as calmly as one would in a park or in a museum.

If they saw her fear, they would use it against her.

"Come on! On the double!" Foxglove snapped.

Without even turning around, Merida showed him her middle finger. Several of the remaining students whistled, while others winced in anticipation. The soldier's face became the color of a beet, but he didn't do anything. 'Must've run outta knives,' Merida thought as she cast a wayward glance at Kristoff's corpse. His blue eyes met hers, empty as twin pools.

Goosebumps spread across her skin like dough coating a pie's fruity filling. But like her mother would, Merida turned the other cheek and held her hands out.

A heavy duffel bag was tossed in her arms, and Merida was out the door a moment later.

As she rummaged through her bag, Merida confronted the hurricane raging inside her skull.

How could Tsar Lunar, the man everyone revered like a god, do something so terrible? Did they really mean so little to him?

Merida's mind trailed back to the scrawny Viking. What was his name again, Henry? ...No, Hiccup!
>What had he said, 'wait for me'? Why? Did he want them to form an alliance, or did he just want to get her alone so he could kill her?<p>

After a moment's consideration, Merida shook her head at the notion. Hiccup was little more than a stranger to her, but she'd seen his behavior in class. He was timid, unsure of himself, and preferred to keep his face buried in a book most of the time. Basically, he was the polar opposite of his best friend Jack Frost.

Could she trust either of them? Merida wasn't sure, but in that moment, her options were far from varied.

But in all of this madness and uncertainty, Merida knew one thing: she wasn't going to die.

She stepped out of the dark building, into the moonlit night...and into the slaughter.

The bag dropped to the ground, forsaken.

Merida covered her mouth with her hands as her eyes widened. She took a few steps back, but her muscles felt like they'd been doused in tranquilizers.

There, hunched over a few feet away from her, were three dead bodies: Fishlegs Ingerman and the Thorston twins.

Fishlegs was lying on his belly, where his blood had gathered in a glossy dark pool. Even from where she stood, Merida saw the bullet hole at the base of his neck.

Mere inches away from Fishlegs' corpse, Merida saw Tuffnut Thorston sitting on his knees with his sister in his arms.
>They both bore bullet wounds.<p>

"Oh mae God..." Merida swallowed so hard it hurt, but she didn't care. Forgetting all about Hiccup, she walked towards the three bodies and crouched over each of them. She gently closed their eyes and whispered words of goodbye.

Merida may not have known them as well as she could have, but she had known enough.

They'd been kids no different from her. They'd had hopes, dreams, and fears...but all of that was gone.

Now, they were nothing but empty shells.

"Well, Tsar," Merida said in a thick, guttural voice. "I hope yer bloody satisfied." She turned to face the building once more. Angrily wiping the tears from her face, she yelled, "YOU BASTARD! I'LL GET YOU! YOU HEAR ME?!" Her words echoed through the city, leaving a thin veil of anger in its wake.

With new determination, Merida marched back to her duffel bag and swung it over her shoulders. Then, she paced her way down the

street.

* * *

><p>"I found 'er in an empty apartment complex." Merida tilted her head at Rapunzel. "An' we spent the night there. We discussed our plan an'..." She gestured at the supplies surrounding them. "Here we are."<p>

Jonathan stared at Merida before holding his hands up. "Okay, wait a second! Time out!" He lowered his hands. "W-what is this," He hand-quoted, "'plan' you're talking about?"

Now, it was Rapunzel's turn to talk. Pushing some golden hair out of her eyes, she spoke. "These machines look like scraps of metal now, but by the time we're done, it'll be a sophisticated piece of technology that'll bring Tsar down."

Jonathan's hands fell to his sides. His brown eyes bugged out like a cartoon character's as he took in the blonde's words. He stared at her before shifting his gaze to Merida, who was grinning and nodding her head at him.

"You mean...?"

"Yep!" Rapunzel chirped. "If the plan works, we'll all get to go home!"

"Go home...?" Jonathan swallowed, ignoring the way his heart fluttered like a hummingbird's wings. He honestly never thought he'd be able to say those two words again.
>Suddenly realizing he was sitting there like a dope, he cleared his throat and straightened. "So, what're you gonna do exactly?"<p>

Rapunzel grinned as she gestured to the computer, which was now beeping with the rhythm of a heart rate monitor. "Well, first things first: Merida's going to hack into Tsar's computer system and make it self-destruct. It'll give us..." She held up her hand, palm down, and wiggled it from side to side. "Eh, twenty minutes before they get the system up and running again." She dropped her hand. "That's where we come in. With no security system and nothing to power our collars, we'll sneak in the building with some home-made explosives."

Jonathan's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious." Merida chimed in. Her eyes gleamed like pools of spring water. Fingering her collar, she added, "You jus' watch. We'll crash their stupid syst'm. Then, we'll all go home."

'I wanna believe you, Merida.' Jonathan thought sadly. _'But no plan's fool-proof. They've already thought of everything, and there's only half of us left.'_

Rapunzel said something, but Jonathan's fear drowned it out. Blinking, he asked, "'Scuse me?"

"I said, would you like to join us?" Rapunzel asked, her grassy-green

eyes locking with his brown ones. "We could always use an extra hand." Her eyes narrowed. "Or would you rather we just kill each other?"

Jonathan's lips became a thin line. He shook his head.

Rapunzel's smile returned. "Good." She stopped, as if remembering something, before pointing at him. "You have a girlfriend, right?"

"Mavis." Jonathan nodded.

"Well, why don'tcha bring 'er 'ere?" Merida asked. "We can keep ye safe."

Jonathan knew that accepting their proposition was the equivalent of signing their death warrants. Mavis may have been asleep now, but there was no denying her 'food' once the sun went down. If these girls - or him, for that matter - were near her then, it would be trouble.

Jonathan didn't know what compelled him to answer. Maybe he was just grateful that these girls had chosen not to play. Maybe he wanted to find a safer place for him and Mavis.

>Or maybe he just wanted to...feed her.<p>

"Okay, we're in."

End
file.